

**Victimhood through a Creaturely Lens: Creatureliness, Trauma and Victimhood in  
Austrian and Italian Literature after 1945.**

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PhD Thesis

‘ I, ALEXANDRA HILLS confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where  
information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the  
thesis.’

  
[Signature]

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**Victimhood through a Creaturely Lens: Creatureliness, Trauma and Victimhood in  
Austrian and Italian Literature after 1945.**  
**(abstract)**

The thesis compares the representation of the Second World War, fascism and the Holocaust in Italian and Austrian literature and film. In Austria, the national myth of ‘Hitler’s first victim’ echoes with the prevalent Italian cultural narrative of the ‘good Italian’, which forecloses uncomfortable reckonings with toxic historical legacies and their traumatic aftermaths. By drawing on a range of theoretical writers such as Benjamin, Weil, Santner and Agamben, I argue that the ‘creature’ is a privileged lens through which victimhood can be examined as it represents the dehumanisation of the human being through traumatic exposure to violence. The notion of the creaturely theorises the ubiquity of animal imagery to represent wartime violence and is a barometer for attitudes towards suffering and victimhood where traumatic experience paradoxically either affirms the value of the victim’s suffering as a guarantor of humanity, or rejects the dehumanising impact of trauma as undesirable. By focussing on embodiment as a primary signifier of the salience of history, I begin my thesis with an analysis of historical consciousness and creaturely embodiment in Carlo Levi’s *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (1945) and Thomas Bernhard’s *Frost* (1963). The second part of the thesis examines Morante’s *La Storia* (1974) to evaluate the role of non-human animals, children and wartime spaces and assess the impact of suffering and trauma on the elaboration of a messianic interpretation of history’s victims. The third chapter deals with the transmission of a legacy of victimhood through generation and orality, and the necessity of developing an ethics of attention to competing narratives of history and national identity in Elisabeth Reichart’s *Februarschatten* (1984) and Anna Waltraud Mitgutsch’s *Die Züchtigung* (1985). The second part of my thesis problematises how the study of the Holocaust mobilises the notion of humanity while relying on the ubiquity of creaturely representation in Primo Levi and Ilse Aichinger. I conclude with a brief examination of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Salò* (1975) and Liliana Cavani’s *Il Portiere di Notte* (1974) in which I explore how filmic explorations of the textual trope of the creaturely, non-human, body imply problematic issues relating to the economy and politics of consumerism via an eroticisation of suffering. The thesis aims to retain a mindfulness of the precarity of a monolithically human definition of embodiment in the aftermath of violent historical events, and interrogate the viability of resting unambiguous narratives of personal and national identity on a troubled embodiment with the aim of accommodating readings that engage historical agency, reflect on the multiplicity of identities and maintain an ethical imperative towards the suffering other.

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**Introduction: Victimhood through a Creaturely Lens: Creatureliness, Trauma and  
Victimhood in Austrian and Italian Literature after 1945.**

*Der süchtige Körper, er hat alle Erfahrungen gespeichert, er rettet dich*<sup>1</sup>

*Questa guerra è la strage delle creature*<sup>2</sup>

Ihre liebsten Romanhelden? *Überall sind die Opfer wichtiger, selbst in den Romanen.*<sup>3</sup>

*Das dunkle Bewusstsein, [im Menschen] sei etwas am Leben, was dem ekelerregenden Tiere  
so wenig fremd sei, dass es von ihm erkannt werden könnte.*<sup>4</sup>

Mary Kessel, commissioned as an official British war artist to report on the liberation of Bergen-Belsen in the Spring of 1945, remarks how suffering and violence redefine the human body in her 1945 war diary. In the entries for September 10<sup>th</sup> and September 11<sup>th</sup> 1945, she writes about the Belsen refugees, freed from the Nazi concentration camp but still stateless, homeless and scarred by their horrific experience. Describing the waves of ‘stateless people that nobody wants’ she underlines how the experience of war and imprisonment has left its mark on their bodies to such an extent that they are barely recognisable as human:

There were men who no longer looked like men. Limbless, blind, bearded and filthy. Men with their arms tied up with string, and rags on their feet, men eating out of sacks, children sitting holding lumps of bread with the flies crawling over them, not moving, staring into space. I have never seen a more pitiable sight. Such bits of humanity with nothing left to hope for, looking without seeing. God seemed very far away from them all.

Tuesday September 11<sup>th</sup>

Will they ever live again? Those pieces of dirt and rags, shuffling and crawling and dribbling. Those apathetic bundles of rags, staring into space, waiting for trains that never came.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Reichart, *La Valse* (Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1992), p.117.

<sup>2</sup> Elsa Morante, *La Storia* (Torino: Einaudi, 1995), p.289.

<sup>3</sup> Ilse Aichinger, ‘Fragebogen’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 3 December 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Einbahnstrasse’, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982), Vol.4, p.91.

<sup>5</sup> Imperial War Museum Archive. Box 11/11/10000708. Mary Kessel, *German Diary August – October 1945: ‘The years that the locust hath eaten’*

Kessel's horror at the sight of human beings having undergone such a physically and psychologically scarring transformation casts uncertainty on the humanity of these Holocaust survivors. The 'men hardly look like men'; they need help to keep themselves upright ('arms tied up with string'); their behaviour is animalistic and passive (the men 'eat out of sacks'); they lack any strength and are overrun with flies – the degrading experience of the Nazi concentration camp is acted out as a kind of physical entropy. The metonymies 'bits of humanity', 'pieces of dirt', 'apathetic bundles of rags' give a sense that the human essence of the survivors has been troubled and diminished through the experience of Holocaust violence. Kessel concludes that these human beings have been created by their historical experience when she notes: 'Remember forever these things that war has made ... We truly are living in quite a new world. Everything is new and very different. Always remember that, in London, in the winter, always remember it.'<sup>6</sup> The creatures of violence in Kessel's quotation mobilise pity and empathy, but also a subtle disgust, a horrific undercurrent in the eyes of the spectator, making her diary an evocative starting point for my investigation.

In this thesis, I undertake a comparative study of creatureliness, vulnerability and victimhood in selected novels, short stories and films by Italian and Austrian authors and filmmakers from 1945 until 1995. I explore ways in which the literary and filmic emphases on the human body's creaturely conflation with that of the animal reveal much about the reverberations of the Second World War in Italian and Austrian national identity. The four quotations at the start of this chapter invite the theoretical and historical reflections that will structure the introduction to the thesis which explores how the depiction of disempowered human bodies through an animal idiom relates to the construction of national identity under the sign of victimhood in Italy and Austria after 1945. Elisabeth Reichart's reflection on the body as a register, as a prime carrier, of historical experience is a crucial foundation to this investigation. Elsa Morante's child protagonist Useppe's diagnosis of the Second World War as the massacre of 'creature', creatures, emphasises that the body as bearer of historical experience is an inherently vulnerable one, exposed to suffering and degradation, and deprived of historical agency. Exposed and vulnerable, the helpless creaturely body faced with the reality of wartime violence is morally privileged as a victim as Ilse Aichinger's citation shows. Moreover, Walter Benjamin's caution about the horrific animal undercurrent to all human existence reveals how the question of the animal pressures our understanding of humanity and invites visceral and emotional responses. Useppe's pitiful representation of the war as 'the

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*



massacre of creatures' has its underside: the creaturely – the repressed bodily, animal foundation to human existence – discomfits and unsettles.

Depictions of embodiment that emphasise animality, passivity, vulnerability to violence, and most importantly attitudes to these modes of embodiment are indicative of implicit investments in the notion of victimhood and erode the possibility of individual agency. In other words, a cultural investment in self-portrayal as victim naturalises and essentialises one's abjection and powerlessness. In a historical context, an emphasis on disempowerment and abjection poses serious problems as to the elaboration of identity, responsibility and agency. Not only are bodily abjection and the liminality of man and animal narrative tropes reflecting cultural myths of national victimhood but these ideas may highlight how the cultural rhetoric of victimhood and its embodiment are essential to the solidification of national and cultural identities after critical historical events, which only a transnational, comparative approach may bring to light. Furthermore, while several monographs explore the relationship of the body to history in the works of the authors I examine, this is the first comparative study to shed light on transnational thematic constellations of the post-war period in Austria and Italy. The dissertation will be organised synthetically, whereby texts will be grouped per formal and thematic similarities.

### **Italian and Austrian national identity after 1945**

I wish to explore these themes in the context of Austrian and Italian post-war literature and film insofar as Austria and Italy have defined themselves as victims of Nazi aggression, a discourse which in Austria has permeated the representation of the nation as an occupied territory, and therefore as victim of a criminal, foreign power. In Italy, the divided memories of Fascism, Nazi and Allied occupation all polarise Italy as a politically fissured territory, at the mercy of external military powers.<sup>7</sup> The realities of wartime suffering and the guilt or repression of toxic historical legacies leave an imprint on the physical body which takes these external pressures into account; the physical alteration caused by past suffering is one aspect of what I call the 'creaturely' in this project. No studies have hitherto explored the theme of creatureliness as a privileged form of embodied victimhood in relation to crises of national identity in Austrian and Italian post-war literature and film.

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<sup>7</sup> In this thesis, I distinguish between historical Fascism, defined as Italy's governing ideology from 1922-1943, and ideological, or structural, fascism, defined by ultra-populism, belligerence, revolutionary and reactionary traditionalism, centred on the nation and the destruction of its enemies.

My exploration of the reverberations of World War Two will situate the two countries in the constellation of victimhood and perpetration by arguing that both nations invested in their self-portrayal as victims of Nazi aggression privileging a guiltless self-identification rather than an open engagement with national participation and consent to atrocities perpetrated by the Axis. The years following the Second World War provoked a severe identity crisis for both countries that had emerged from the war with devastated economies, fragmented territories and ruined cities. The generation that was to mend these war-torn nations had been brought up with non-democratic belligerent ideologies in highly administered societies; this generation was now entrusted with managing the transition to democracy and peace. Furthermore, a very fragile and fragmented sense of national identity was to emerge after the Second World War: Austria's empire had been dismantled with the Treaty of St Germain of 1919 and the First Republic wracked by factionalism, civil war and paramilitary challenges to the democratic foundations of the state, leading to the assassination of Chancellor Dollfuß in 1936. In Italy, fascism had centralised a fragmented and discordant nation under a powerful, belligerent ideological banner accompanied by civil oppression, arbitrary violence and disastrous colonial campaigns. Materially and existentially both nations, and their peoples, were in tatters.

In Austria, the founding document of the country's 'victimhood myth' was the Moscow Declaration, signed by the Allies and the Soviet union in 1943 declaring Austria to be 'the first free country to fall victim to Nazi aggression.'<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, British foreign policy briefs enforced this definition by referring to Hitler's Anschluss of Austria as 'the rape' of Austria, which defines the state as a suffering body exposed to violent historical and physical forces.<sup>9</sup> Further Anglo-American policy documents dating from the end of the war note the 'softness' of Austrian patriotism for the Third Reich, in order to strengthen Austria's belief in its separateness from Germany: 'the natural "softness" of the Austrian character and the weakness of the patriotic motive for unreasoning hope combine to produce greater pessimism regarding

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<sup>8</sup> Cited by Robert H. Keyserlinck, *Austria in World War II: An Anglo-American Dilemma* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988), p.206.

<sup>9</sup> Chapter XV of Winston Churchill's *The Second World War: Volume 1 'The Gathering Storm'* [1948] (Boston: Mariner Books, 1980) is titled 'The Rape of Austria' (p.232-249), and Churchill states that 'Two years had passed since Hitler's seizure of the Rhineland in 1936 and his rape of Austria in 1938', p.192 [emphasis mine – the pronoun 'his' suggests that the *Anschluss* can be interpreted beyond the framework of expansionist geopolitics and seen as a personal act of violence on behalf of Hitler against the feminised body of the State of Austria]. See also Rolf Steininger, *Austria, Germany and the Cold War: From the Anschluss to the State Treaty of 1955*, tr. Rolf Steininger (Oxford: Berghahn, 2008), p.8: 'Five years later [1943], when the Foreign Office began making plans for the future of Austria, it was considered legitimate in London to ask whether the *Anschluss* had been a case of "rape" or "seduction".'

Germany's chances in the war in Austria than in Germany proper.'<sup>10</sup> Thus, Austria's image as an innocent victim of Nazi aggression is an imposed, diplomatically-expedient narrative constructed by the Allies in order to diminish the ideological appeal of Nazism in Austria and prepare Austria's allegiance with the West come the end of the war. The Allies had every interest in maintaining this myth to stir up anti-German sentiment in the country: after the war and the period of Allied Occupation, the State Treaty of 1955 conferred independence upon Austria without any mention of willing complicity in Hitler's war machine.

Even though the final draft of the document cautions Austria's shared responsibility, not blame or guilt ('Austria is reminded, however, that she has a responsibility which she cannot evade for participation in the war on the side of Hitlerite Germany'), the document reads as a diagnosis of a 'clean bill of national health', as Keyserlinck argues:

Once the Allies decided to stress Austria's wartime occupation together with its liberation and restoration to national independence rather than dwell on its unification or cooperation with Nazi Germany, the door was opened to a new, more positive Austrian self-image. The Austrians accepted the Allies' gift of a clean bill of national health, which enabled them to concentrate after the war on national reconciliation rather than large-scale retribution for questionable wartime activities. Postwar Austria therefore derives substantial legal and moral benefits from the occupationist theory.<sup>11</sup>

As Hella Pick notes the Allies included 'the rider that Austria could not escape responsibility for its involvement in the war on the side of Hitler's Germany; but this turned out to be a dead letter when the State Treaty of 1955 came to be finalised.'<sup>12</sup> From 1945 onwards, the desire to build new cultural foundations for the post-war Austrian state crystallised anxieties regarding guilt and victimhood in relation to the recent past. Leopold Figl, a returnee from Dachau concentration camp, announced on 21 December 1945:

Das Österreich von morgen wird ein neues, ein revolutionäres Österreich sein. Es wird von Grund auf umgestaltet und weder eine Wiederholung von 1918 noch von 1933, noch eine von 1938 werden. [...] Wir wollen das neue, das junge Österreich!<sup>13</sup>

The emphasis on a clean slate for Austrian culture was complicated by a lack of political models who had not been tainted by association with the Nazi regime; as Bushell notes, the lack of an

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<sup>10</sup> Cited from a 1944 memorandum on 'Austrian Nationalism' in Keyserlinck, p.211.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.191.

<sup>12</sup> Hella Pick, *Guilty Victims: Austria from the Holocaust to Haider* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2000), p.15.

<sup>13</sup> Cited by Anthony Bushell, 'Writing in Austria after 1945: The political, institutional and publishing context' in *A History of Austrian Literature* (1918-2000), ed. by Katrin Kohl and Ritchie Robertson (London: Camden House, 2006), pp. 163-180, p.164.

Austrian government in exile compounded with the fact that Austria had the highest proportion of writers forced into exile, who were not encouraged to return after the war, led to the absence of impetus behind Figl's call to rebuild Austrian culture anew after 1945.<sup>14</sup> The first decade after the Second World War did see the emergence of forums for new literary voices such as *Stimmen der Gegenwart* edited by Hans Weigel which, according to the editor in the journal's second edition in 1952, served as an agitator to the cultural establishment, and as a reminder to nurture a new generation of artists:

Sofern es eine Kollektivschuld gibt, ist es die von der vor 1918 Geborenen gegenüber den Jüngeren. Diese Schuld bewusst zu machen und zur Erfüllung längst fälliger Pflichten aufzurufen, war und bleibt des Herausgebers Leitmotiv für die 'Stimmen der Gegenwart'<sup>15</sup>

However, the most influential cultural figures of the immediate post-war years extolled the values of reactionary conservatism whereby art and literature were deployed for the purpose of what Oliver Rathkolb has called 'system stabilisation [...] that had already been exploited by Hitler and his associates.'<sup>16</sup> Literary critic Karl Müller notes that Rudolf Henz, former head of *Vaterländische Front* and editor of the influential journal *Wort in der Zeit* which continues to shape the Austrian public's literary tastes under its new name *Literatur und Kritik*, embodied the spirit of the Second Republic:

Henzens ideologische und literarische Position nach 1945 qualifizierten ihn als den Mann der Stunde: katholisch, kirchentreu, österreichisch, großkoalitionär, abendländisch, antikommunistisch, pragmatisch, ästhetisch traditionell, ordnungsverbunden, volksverbunden.<sup>17</sup>

When in June 1945 the new Österreichischer Volkspartei (ÖVP) declared its fifteen principles for a new Austria, the eighth principle concerned the encouragement of Austria's cultural spirit which was to be based on 'die zielbewusste Pflege des österreichischen Geistes und die schärfste Betonung des eigenständigen österreichischen Kulturgutes, das in dem als Vätererbe auf uns überkommenen christlich-abendländischen Ideengut begründet ist.'<sup>18</sup> Thus, the post-war Austrian cultural *status quo* was envisaged through a political lens that looked backwards,

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165; Cited by Anthony Bushell, *Poetry in a Provisional State* (Bangor: University of Wales Press, 2007), p.28.

<sup>15</sup> Hans Weigel, 'Vorbemerkung' in *Stimmen der Gegenwart* 2 (Wien: Verlag für Jugend und Volk, 1952), pp.5-9. p.6.

<sup>16</sup> Oliver Rathkolb, *The Paradoxical Republic: Austria 1945-2005*, tr. by Otmar Binder (Oxford: Berghahn, 2010), p.214.

<sup>17</sup> Cited by Bushell, 2006, p.167.

<sup>18</sup> Klaus Berchtold, *Österreichische Parteiprogramme 1868-1966* (München: Oldenbourg, 1967), p.377. Cited by Anthony Bushell, *Poetry in A Provisional State: The Austrian Lyric 1945-1955* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), p.15.

to the Habsburg dynasty, and to Austria's cultural traditions and Catholic heritage which anchored its specious political legitimation as Hitler's 'first victim.' Rathkolb argues that art and culture were essential bolsters to the politics of reconstructing the Austrian state, playing 'a protective, even restorative role' in this phase of the Second Republic.<sup>19</sup> The victimhood myth was a politically expedient self-definition which bonded the fragile nation, which remained under Allied and Soviet occupation until 1955. Though Austrian Chancellor Franz Vranitsky publicly disavowed the victimhood myth in his 'Entschuldigung und Bekennung' speech of 8 July 1991,<sup>20</sup> the acknowledgement of Austria's participation in Nazi war crimes during the Second World War is not yet universally recognised. Until very recently, the Austrian pavilion at Auschwitz continued to emphasise the Hitler's 'first victim' narrative, showing the Austrian flag being trampled by boots and plaques emphasises exculpatory narratives about Austria's participation in the fight against Franco in Spain and Austrian resistance. A plaque explaining the events of the Anschluss was entitled 'Das Ende Österreichs' and noted that 'in weiten Teilen der Bevölkerung bestand die Bereitschaft zur Verteidigung Österreichs.'<sup>21</sup> The exhibition, closed permanently in October 2013, ignored the significant role played by the two fascist movements, the Austrofascist *Heimwehr*, that stirred anti-semitic and anti-Slav sentiment in Austria in the name of an authoritarian nationalistic vision of Austria built on the traditional social hierarchies, and the Austrian Nazi Party, that galvanized support for Hitler in the years leading up to the Anschluss: two movements that, according to Michael Mann, made Austria seem 'the *most* fascist country in the interwar world, since it had two fascist movements, each with mass support, each able to seize power and to govern the country.'<sup>22</sup> Though a note dated 2013 declared that since 1991 the exhibition no longer corresponded to the political and historical self-understanding of contemporary Austria and that a new exhibition is being planned ('konzipiert'), the narrative of blamelessness and victimhood prevailed at the main site of Nazi genocide commemoration during the time of writing.<sup>23</sup>

The legal definition of State sovereignty according to which Austria did not exist as nation between 1938 and 1945 and therefore could not share any burden of responsibility for

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<sup>19</sup> Rathkolb, p. 214.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.24.

<sup>21</sup> Inscription on exhibition plaque at the Austrian Pavilion, Auschwitz I, Oswiecim, Poland. Correct on 18 September 2013. See appendix 2.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Mann, *Fascists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.207.

<sup>23</sup> See appendix 2, fig. a: 'Die im März 1978 eröffnete österreichische Länderausstellung entspricht aufgrund ihrer Darstellung der Rolle Österreichs während des NS-Regimes nicht dem historischen oder politischen Selbstverständnis des heutigen Österreichs. ' Austria's Auschwitz pavilion is due to reopen in 2017.

atrocities perpetrated on behalf of the Third Reich further supported Austria's narrative of victimhood.<sup>24</sup> The waters of the sovereignty debate were further muddled when a 1956 survey revealed that whereas 49% of the Austrian people believed that the Austrians were an independent people in their own right, 46% of the respondents still regarded themselves as Germans; whereas the dominant narrative of victimhood detracted from Austria's participation of Hitler's atrocities, the sense of cultural and national affiliation to Germany still defined many Austrians' relationship to the new nation.<sup>25</sup> In what Hella Pick describes as the 'second stage' of the evolution of the victimhood myth spanning the period of economic boom from 1955 to 1986, the issue of Austria's participation in the historical calamities of the Second World War was pushed aside for the sake of economic recovery: 'The outside world was more interested in Austria's post-war achievements than in its Nazi record, its anti-Semitism or its reluctance to face up to its past; the four wartime allies still had no qualms about endorsing Austria's status as Nazi Germany's first victim.'<sup>26</sup> The extraordinary spurt of economic growth that followed the Second World War was due in large part to the funds injected by the Marshall Plan 'of which Austria was one of the top ten per capita recipients [...] and arguably profited more than any other country in the European Recovery Program.'<sup>27</sup> A perceived victimhood and a lack of historical agency have a concrete impact not only on foreign policy but also encourage economic and political investment. Indeed, Sassoon notes how 'dominant historical narratives achieve their status because they are produced and promoted by dominant groups and by those entrusted with the task of diffusing them.'<sup>28</sup> Klaus Amann writes that literature is a counter-image to prevalent narratives: 'Sie ist das 'Widerbild' [...], und zwar im doppelten Sinne: als Text, der der Vergesslichkeit des Leben trotzt und als Gegenrede gegen das öffentliche, taktische und pragmatische Gerede.'<sup>29</sup> Hence, literary and cinematic approaches to dominant cultural narratives complicate and reorient overarching interpretive frameworks of the past, inflecting them according to individual artists' idioms, countering the artificial

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<sup>24</sup> Heidemarie Uhl, 'From Victim Myth to Co-Responsibility Thesis' in *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, ed. by Richard Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner, Claudio Fogu (Duke: Duke University Press, 2006), pp.40-73(p.54).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.43.

<sup>26</sup> Pick, p.3.

<sup>27</sup> Günther Bischoff, Anton Pelinka, Dieter Stiefel, 'Introduction' *The Marshall Plan in Austria* ed. by *Ibid.* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2000), pp.1-10(p.1).

<sup>28</sup> Donald Sassoon, 'Italy after Fascism: The predicament of dominant narratives' in *Life after Death: Approaches to a Cultural and Social History of Europe during the 1940s and 1950s*, ed. by Richard Bessel and Dirk Schumann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp.259-290(p.259).

<sup>29</sup> Klaus Amann, 'Krieg als Thema der österreichischen Nachkriegsliteratur' in *Kontinuitäten und Brüche* (Oberhausen: Athena, 2006), 39-62. p.59.

dominance of a depersonalised, objective and homogenising notion of collective memory with discreet, subjective and highly contradictory voices.

The narrative of victimhood proved equally salient in Italy, though it is more diffuse and less specific to Fascism and Nazism in Italy, rather, as Sassoon notes, the victimhood myth in Italy corroborates a further cultural narrative in that Italian is rather a victim of insufficient moral and political agency. Inefficiency, obedience to authority and cowardliness were the reasons Italians suffered rather than took part in their historical fate.<sup>30</sup> The reverberations of Italy's multiple roles throughout the Second World War continue to shape our understanding of the Italian nation, the legacy of Fascism and that of the Resistance. The significance, impact and legacy of Fascism and its allegiance with the Third Reich has been hotly debated, particularly during the Italian equivalent of the German *Historikerstreit* sparked by Ernesto Galli Della Loggia's 1999 polemic which discussed the collapse of Fascism (25 July 1943) and the Armistice with the Allies (September 8, 1943) as the 'death of the nation.'<sup>31</sup> On 8 September 1943, Italy changed sides in the conflict, acquiring the ambiguous status of co-belligerent with the Allies. The army collapsed, king Vittorio Emanuele II and Mussolini fled Rome; the Resistance was only held together by its common enemies: the Nazis and the Italian Fascist army. However, this picture is further complicated by the fact that the army had no clear orders on how to proceed: on the 8 September 1943 Marshall Pietro Badoglio announced the Armistice in a radio announcement stating that all hostilities against Allied troops were to cease and that the Italian Army must react to 'altri attacchi da qualsiasi altra provenienza'.<sup>32</sup> This unclear policy resulted in catastrophic losses, the most famous example of this being the massacre of 5,000 Italian troops from 15 September 1943 in Cephalonia following General Antonio Gandin's refusal to disarm the 33<sup>rd</sup> *Acqui* Infantry Division to the German XXII Mountain Corp.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, following the establishment of the Republic of Salò, proclaimed on 23 September 1943, some soldiers travelled north to fight on the side of the German invaders and occupiers. The complex choices faced by Italians in the aftermath of 25 July and 8 September 1943 have contributed to the ambiguous reverberations of the Second

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.290.

<sup>31</sup> Ernesto Galli della Loggia, *La morte della patria* (Bari: Laterza, 1996), pp.5-10.

<sup>32</sup> RAI Announcement of Marshall Pietro Badoglio, 8 September 1943, 19.42: <http://www.grr.rai.it/dl/grr/notizie/audio/ContentItem-d36f4a09-c798-417f-b35d-6fbde3f299e4-audio.html?pos=1>. [Accessed: 19 September 2013]

<sup>33</sup> See also Robert van Trombly, 'Massacre of the Acqui division' in Alexander Mikaberidze (ed.), *Atrocities, Massacres and War Crimes: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2013), p.1.; Gian Enrico Rusconi, *Cefalonia: Quando gli italiani si battono* (Torino: Einaudi, 2004); Elena Agarossi, *A Nation Collapses: The Italian Surrender after 1943*, tr. Harvey Ferguson II (Cambridge: Cambridge, University Press, 2001), p.6,104.

World War in which Italian national identity has been subsumed into the ideological battle of the Resistance versus the Nazi-Fascist occupation of Italy after 1943. However, the two decades of Fascism and Italy's intervention in the Second World War as Hitler's ally must also be considered in an examination of the legacy of the violent past in Italy. Elena Agarossi notes that it is difficult to reach a nuanced view of the Italian history of the Second World War that is acceptable to both sides, what she calls that of the victors and defeated: 'there are only partial reconstructions, with no common base: the story of the victors and that of the defeated.'<sup>34</sup> Nationalist and anti-Fascist parties have so fragmented the understanding of Italy's post-war history that national identity has suffered as a result, according to Agarossi: 'partisan identities prevailed over and erased a national identity.'<sup>35</sup> 'Collective memory' therefore seems an inadequate and simplifying construct with which to approach the polyvalent narratives and myths dominating the reverberations of war in Italy.

Sassoon's helpful article evaluates dominant myths that have oriented political and cultural legacies of Fascism: namely Renzo De Felice's incendiary 1975 'Intervista sul fascismo', which provoked incensed debate on the left because it radically contradicted the notion of an Italy founded on the righteous moral actions of a group of Communist resistance fighters. For De Felice, Italy had been let down by its Allies, the Germans and then later the British and Americans, and would have enjoyed a more felicitous historical fate under Mussolini because, according to Felice, 'the two societies that the two regimes wished to bring into existence were exceedingly different' because 'there are enormous differences between Italian Fascism and German National Socialism [...] they are so different that they are exceedingly difficult to reunite.'<sup>36</sup> Seeking to undermine any possible comparison between Fascism in Italy and German Nazism, De Felice promoted a view of Fascism as a misunderstood, dehistoricised peace-loving and socially progressive movement which had been hijacked by opportunists on the Eastern and Western fronts. This inflammatory view corroborated the diffuse myth that suited those who had not identified with the myth of the heroic Communist redemptive Resistance, that of the Italians as 'good people': 'italiani brava gente'. Fundamentally ineffectual, cowardly, familistic and disconnected from the vagaries of global and national politics, the 'good Italian' was kind-hearted, simple and most importantly, innocent. It is the result, according to Fogu 'of the active efforts to "purge" Italian Fascism of

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<sup>34</sup> Agarossi, p.134.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.138.

<sup>36</sup> Renzo de Felice, *Fascism* tr. Michael Arthur Ledeen (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1976), p.40,83.



“perpetrator” traits.<sup>37</sup> The myth of Italians as Europe’s ‘brava gente’ was forged by politicians such as Gaetano Salvemini who in 1943 distinguished Italian soldiers’ ‘inborn sense of humanity’ from the ‘cold, mechanical brutality of the uncivilised and barbarian Teutonic robot.’<sup>38</sup> Giuseppe de Santis’ 1965 film *Italiani brava gente* portrays a group of Italian soldiers taking part in the ill-fated Russian campaign during the Second World War and gives shape to the myth of the everyday Italian, trapped in a senseless machine of war and violence over which he has no control and of which he has no understanding. In their dictionary of Italian war films, Claudio Bertieri, Umberto Rossi and Ansano Gennarelli describe the film as ‘un assurdo e tragico scontro fra proletari’, ‘un film in cui la stessa denuncia degli orrori della Guerra rimane abbondantemente al di sotto di quanto approdato sugli schermi ad opera di altri autori più progressisti,’ reflecting the potency of a discourse that strips the Italian everyman of political agency; unable to take a stand and fated to be trapped in the workings of ideologies he does not understand, the Italian everyman portrayed in *Italiani brava gente* corroborates the avoidance of historical responsibility and the stark differentiation between Italians and Nazis in the years following the Second World War.<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, Emiliano Perra in his exploration of the Italian discourse of victimhood in television and cinema notes that ‘the best cultural context for comparison [with Italy] is Austria. A widespread culture of guiltlessness characterised both Italian and Austrian politics of memory about Nazism and WWII.’<sup>40</sup> Battini also upholds the argument that the ‘good Italian’ myth was sustained and perpetuated by the lack of Italian Nuremberg, as the Italian public was never confronted with its criminal protagonists in the period of Fascism and Nazi occupation in the same way that the Nuremberg Trials brought guilt and complicity to the forefront of public consciousness in Germany.<sup>41</sup> While the German was depicted as a Teutonic robot ready to unleash the most monstrous savagery on civilian populations, the Italian was sensitive, compassionate, charitable – a problematic distinction, highlighted by Boca: ‘Il mito degli “italiani brava gente” che ha coperto tante infamie, appare in realtà all’esame dei fatti, un

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<sup>37</sup> Claudio Fogu, ‘Italiani brava gente: The Legacy of Fascist Historical culture on the Politics of Memory in Italy’ in *The Politics of Postwar Memory in Europe*, pp.147-176(p.150).

<sup>38</sup> Cited by Emiliano Perra, *Conflicts of Memories: Reception of the Holocaust in Italian Films and Television Programmes, 1945 to the present* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), p.43. For more on this see Filippo Focardi, ‘“Bravo italiano” e “cattivo Tedesco”. Riflessioni sulla genesi di due immagini incrociate’ in *Storia e Memoria* 5:1 (1999), pp.55-83.

<sup>39</sup> Claudio Bertieri, Umberto Rossi, Ansano Gennarelli, *L’ultimo schermo: cinema di Guerra, cinema di pace* (Milan: Dedalo, 1984), p.104.

<sup>40</sup> Perra, p.130n62.

<sup>41</sup> Michele Battini, *The Missing Italian Nuremberg* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp.21-23.

artificio fragile, ipocrita' meaning that most Italian perpetrators never had to pay for their crimes.<sup>42</sup>

While Article 29 of the Armistice signed on 8 September 1943 proclaimed Italy as a co-belligerent in recognition of Marshall Badoglio's anti-German activities, as Focardi and Klinkhammer note, the international position of Italy became ever more insecure from 1945 onwards and therefore 'the priority became the need to keep the country from being harshly punished by the victors.'<sup>43</sup> In order to minimise focus on the period in which Italy fought alongside the Axis with the Third Reich, the ministries of War and Foreign Affairs bolstered by the press 'assigned all responsibility to Germany and Mussolini while portraying the Italian people and soldiers as innocent victims.'<sup>44</sup> Indeed, a 1944 article in the communist Resistance newspaper *L'Unità* claims that 'il fascismo ci trascinò in una Guerra ignominiosa contro la volontà del popolo.'<sup>45</sup> The Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs confirmed that countries invaded by the Axis would have seen in the Germans a ferocious, bestial enemy, while recognising in the Italian a 'brother struck with a common calamity', there to alleviate the suffering wreaked by the nasty German robots.<sup>46</sup> The main rhetorical strategy that enabled this translation from Fascist adversary to anti-Fascist co-belligerent was the insistence across the Italian press that Italian war crimes, war criminals and occupation regimes could not be compared to those of Nazi Germany. Germans were naturally more violent than the Italians who had been forced into a conflict that many claimed not to represent their political interests or ethics. Focardi and Klinkhammer cite a typical example from 1945 in the monarchist newspaper *L'Italia Nuova* which argues

the Nazis are typical war criminals [...] the need for an internal commission to interrogate Nazi criminals and for their being judged by the countries where the crimes were committed derives not so much from a plan of reprisal as from the incapacity of the German people to judge: an incapacity that comes from its greater responsibility and the tenacity with which it adheres to Nazi philosophy.<sup>47</sup>

Ruth Ben-Ghiat identifies this tendency in Rossellini's *Roma Città Aperta* (1945), in which to be foreign was to be 'bad' and to be Italian was to be by nature 'good': Christian,

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<sup>42</sup> Angelo del Boca, *Italiani brava gente: Un mito duro a morire* (Milano: Neri Pozza, 2008), p.8,19

<sup>43</sup> Focardi & Klinkhammer, 'The question of Fascist Italy's war crimes. The construction of a self-acquitting myth', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 9:3(2004), pp.330-348, p.335.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p.336.

<sup>45</sup> Filippo Focardi, *L'immagine del "cattivo Tedesco" e il mito del "bravo italiano"* (Milan: Rinoceronte, 2005), p.33.

<sup>46</sup> Focardi and Klinkhammer, p.339.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p.334.

with a sense of civic responsibility, family-oriented, resisting, for the sake of common good of the nation, as the redemptive vision of the Vatican at the end of the film highlights.<sup>48</sup>

In this way, the myth of the ‘good Italian’ as opposed to the naturally ferocious tyrannical German was developed. This even gained momentum among the Roman Jews who exonerated Austrians as victims of an unwilling political disaster. They were perceived to share a similar historical fate to Italians, as victims of Hitler’s aggression coerced into military cooperation with the Nazis, Debenedetti – writing as Fausto Coen – in his *16 ottobre 1943: la grande razzia degli ebrei a Roma* – refers to a popular myth of the ‘good Austrian’ soldier versus the evil Teutonic oppressor: ‘Olga di Veroli era già in strada col padre. Un soldato tedesco (forse austriaco secondo la consueta interpretazione popolare) le si avvicinò e le fece capire di andarsene’ emphasising that those who let her go are ‘austriaci e non tedeschi.’<sup>49</sup> In this memoir of the deportation of Jews from the Roman ghetto on October 16, 1943, a friend of the narrator is saved by a group of soldiers who show the Italian Jews some human compassion (‘La legenda formatasi poi nel Ghetto ha deciso che fossero due austriaci.’) who establish ‘un tacito patto di protezione’ with the Jew named S.<sup>50</sup> Conversely, the Manichean distinction of the dutiful Italian and the brutal Germanic invaders targeted Austrians as the ‘most Nazi’ of the Nazis in the context of post-1945 geopolitics. When asked about the question of Südtirol (a territory which had been ceded to the Italians (and renamed *Alto Adige*) as a reward for their joining World War One on the side of the Allies in 1915, which Austria reclaimed after 1945), Count Carlo Sforza, Italian Foreign minister from 1947 to 1951 stated ‘Austria is a German country and will return to Germany. Let us remember that the most horrible murders were committed by Austrian Nazis. We must remain united in the face of the constantly threatening danger of the German hordes who will always try to move toward the Mediterranean.’<sup>51</sup> Seeking to distinguish the historical fate of the Italians from the enthusiastic approval of Nazism and teutonic barbarity in Austria further confirms the perceived necessity to emphasise Italy as a vulnerable country under threat of external coercion and violence. This example indicates why a sense of historical victimhood, of having been forced into radical avenues of totalitarian dictatorship against the profound will of the people and as an aberrance

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<sup>48</sup> Ruth Ben-Ghiat, ‘Liberation, Italian Cinema and the Fascist Past’ in *Italian Fascism: History, Memory and Representation* ed. by Richard Bosworth, Patrizia Dogliani (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), pp.83-101(p.84).

<sup>49</sup> Fausto Coen, ‘16 ottobre 1943: la grande razzia degli ebrei di Roma’ in Stanislao Pugliese, *Italian Fascism and antifascism: a critical anthology* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp.147-158,157.

<sup>50</sup> Giacomo Debenedetti, *16 ottobre 1943* (Roma: Riuniti, 1978), p.47,52.

<sup>51</sup> Cited by Rolf Steininger, *Austria, Germany and the Cold War: From the Anschluss to the State Treaty* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2008), p.59.

relative to the country's national character, may prove a suitable mode of comparison of the cultural reverberations of war in Italy and Austria.

The multivalence of Italian attitudes to the Fascist past complicates the landscape of post-war Italian cultural politics surrounding the war, the Holocaust and Fascism. Writing about the Racial Laws of 1938, Folli speaks of a lacerated and wounded 'national memory', once again inscribing victimhood into the Italian national narrative: 'non è ancora così netto il confine fra riflessione storica e confronto politico: come se quella lontana pagina avesse lasciato ferite profonde e insondabili nella memoria lacerata del paese.'<sup>52</sup> John Foot has spoken of a 'divided memory' in Italian post-war cultural and political discourse: 'divided memory is the tendency for divergent or contradictory narratives to emerge after events and to be elaborated and interpreted in private stories as well as through forms of public commemoration and ritual.'<sup>53</sup> Here, I steer away from the term memory and prefer the term narrative. In my view, this offers a more accurate reflection of the means whereby historical events and their legacies are 'emplotted' and adapted to given contexts without the cognitive implications of the term 'memory', as we are often dealing with events that are not really memories at all, nor even experiences, but rather a pervasive sense of the past that conditions subsequent attitudes to the past and urgently demands to be reckoned with in light of an elaboration of national character.<sup>54</sup> As Gordon affirms perceptively, when dealing with the legacy of the Second World War and Fascism in Italy, 'powerful and flawed stereotypes, myths, narrative tropes and explanatory tools for dealing with the collective past pose a cluster of difficult questions concerning both the Holocaust and Fascism, questions of individual and collective complicity, guilt, responsibility, and the tricky moral, political, legal distinction between commission and omission in historical action.'<sup>55</sup> Complicated narratives of the 'good Italian' as the unwilling participant in a war whose atrocities were anathema to both national character and individual conviction reflect a discrepancy between the coercive force of the state and the vague oppositional stance of a powerless people, suggesting a profound discrepancy between individual Italians and the state structure.

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<sup>52</sup> Stefano Folli, 'Prefazione' in Roberto Chiarini (ed.), *L'intellettuale antisemita* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2008), p.vii.

<sup>53</sup> John Foot, *Divided Memory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.10.

<sup>54</sup> Hayden White's influential essay on 'emplotment' and the relation of historiography to factual truth touches upon the crucial issue of 'acceptable' versus 'unacceptable' modes of emplotment regarding events such as the Holocaust. See Hayden White, 'Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth' in *The Postmodern History Reader*, ed. by Keith Jenkins (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp.392-397.

<sup>55</sup> Robert S. C. Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), p.141.

Underlying the anxieties regarding Austria and Italy's participation in the Second World War on the side of the Third Reich is the inescapable legacy of the Holocaust. The continuing vigour of scholarly debate about the legacy of Fascist and Nazi totalitarianism in the aftermath of the Second World War is due to the enduring impact, fascination, and even what might provocatively be called the 'appeal' of the Holocaust.<sup>56</sup> Perceived to be a unique, and paradigm-shifting event, the Holocaust has had vast critical implications not only for those involved in the persecution, extermination and enslavement of selected groups, but has also entailed a critical re-evaluation of the concept of humanity to the extent that it has come to be defined by many as the single defining event of modernity, and in more extreme, controversial terms, a powerful metaphor for all types of institutional and state-sponsored violence at a transnational and trans-historical scale.<sup>57</sup> The Holocaust has engendered a vast historiography, but literary and cultural events have been instrumental in shaping its significance and legacy: in the early 1980s Yosef Yerushalmi declared that he had 'no doubt whatever that its image is being shaped, not at the historian's anvil, but in the novelist's crucible.'<sup>58</sup> The enduring impact of the Holocaust – understood as 'an assault on the body' – is that it radically redefines an understanding of human embodiment and throws into question the very material, political, social and biological forces that constitute our understanding of the human body, and of humanity as a whole.<sup>59</sup> The legacy of the Holocaust must examine the effect of oppositions between self and other, inside and outside, civilised and barbaric, human and non-human which are played out in an engagement with the body. As we will see, in the aftermath of the Holocaust these oppositions – upon which the mass persecution of millions of Europeans on the grounds of religion, ethnicity and sexuality hinged – are critiqued but sometimes subtly upheld. Fears, hopes, anxieties and fascination associated with various types of bodies act as barometers for attitudes towards victimhood, historical agency and responsibility. Furthermore, by engaging with the porosity of self/other, animal/human, and victim/perpetrator binary oppositions, my exploration of 'creaturely life' across generations and across timescales

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<sup>56</sup> Ruth Franklin warns about 'our [Western] culture's almost too intense fascination with the Holocaust', *A Thousand Darkesses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.4.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas Laqueur defines the Holocaust as 'the greatest human disaster of a disastrous age' in 'Travelling in the Classic Style', *LRB*, Vol.24, N.17, 5 Sept 2002, p.9. Giorgio Agamben in an influential and controversial statement has described the notion of the 'concentration camp', 'not as a historical fact ... but as the nomos of the modern political space in which we still live' in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, tr. Vincenzo Binetti, Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p.35.

<sup>58</sup> Cited by Ruth Franklin, p.3.

<sup>59</sup> Gene A. Plunka, *Holocaust Drama: The Theatre of Atrocity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.73.

demonstrates contradictory investments in the legacy of Austrian complicity with the Third Reich and Italian allegiance with Hitler's regime. Prevalent narratives of victimhood, innocence and disempowerment are crystallised, as I argue, in the depiction of the human body in its experiences of psychic and physical fissure.

## History and Trauma

A discussion of the legacies of Austrian and Italian Second World War history, rooted as they are in violence, war and dictatorship, cannot bypass the notion of trauma. Caruth's influential study remains a foundational text on trauma in relation to the Holocaust and World War Two and her introductory definition of the psychological nature of trauma is helpful: 'in its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations.'<sup>60</sup> The body is the root and store of traumatic experience which overwhelms and shatters its integrity in unpredictable, latent and visceral ways. Indeed, the Greek origin of the word *trauma* means 'wound' indicating how experience, in other words, the individual's history, wounds the body. Citing Freud's discussion of Tancred in Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* in his analysis of 'Traumatic Neuroses', Caruth argues that literature is the privileged medium of traumatic experience, because trauma 'is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available.'<sup>61</sup> Benjamin has encapsulated the idea of how experience wounds the body in his essay on Nikolai Leskov in which he states:

Eine Generation, die noch mit der Pferdebahn zur Schule gegangen war, stand unter freiem Himmel in einer Landschaft in der nichts unverändert geblieben war als die Wolken und in der Mitte, in einem Kraftfeld zerstörender Ströme und Explosionen, der winzige, gebrechliche Menschenkörper.<sup>62</sup>

The human being (now 'ärmer an mittelbarer Erfahrung') now has a body which becomes the prime signifier of historical suffering and lived experience. Thus, Benjamin's association of trauma with the fragile 'Menschenkörper' suggests that trauma and suffering must pass through an understanding of human embodiment. Hence, a radically shattering experience of wounding and communication breakdown paradoxically affirms the humanity of the suffering human subject. However, Caruth and Freud's assessment of the human subject as always already

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<sup>60</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p.11.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

<sup>62</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Erfahrung und Armut', *Gesammelte Schriften* II (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), p.439.

inherently traumatised, is problematic for an analysis of trauma anchored in actual violent historical events. This is why LaCapra makes the careful distinction between *historical* trauma, rooted in real historical events, which he argues must remain separate from *structural* trauma, defined as ‘an anxiety-producing condition of possibility related to the possibility for historical traumatisation.’<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, LaCapra does concede that the notion of trauma is just as productive to the definition of national identity as it is to that of the individual: ‘as historical events that are indeed crucial in the history of peoples, traumas might instead be seen as posing the problematic question of identity and as calling for more critical ways of coming to terms with both their legacy and problems such as absence and loss.’<sup>64</sup> Indeed, Michael Minden argues that the phenomenon of the ‘broken subject’ emerged with the advent of technology and the surge of capitalism in the modernist era, but that the Second World War was the cataclysmic event that made an engagement with man’s shaky foundations urgent.<sup>65</sup> Fassin and Rechtman also highlight the simultaneously abject and sublimating experience of trauma by evaluating the process whereby that trauma is the ‘experience of inhumanity’ which paradoxically affirms the ‘suffering lot of humanity’: ‘today it is widely held that that trauma enables people who are suffering to share the common lot of a suffering humanity, without distinguishing victims of the basis of social position or of the kind of painful event they have experienced.’<sup>66</sup> Benjamin’s assessment of the shattering nature of uncommunicable experience – characterising the trauma of modernity and industrial wartime social transformation – makes the body a prime bearer of meaning in this regard. In addition, through Freud’s notion of traumatic neurosis as a wound shared by anyone with an unstable and identity-altering past and Fassin’s caution that trauma both collapses and paradoxically reaffirms humanity in its shared vulnerability, traumatisation and victimhood, a worrying collapse of any historical experience into the visceral territory of trauma emerges.

Thus, in literary dealings with nefarious historical legacies rooted in the violence and chaos of the Second World War, a human being’s self-definition as such is often disrupted due to the shattering effects of trauma and violence on the body; this experience paradoxically reduces the human to its bodily vulnerability, thereby asserting the commonality of human destiny in the fragility of bodily, creaturely life – a humanity that Crowley defines as ‘absolute

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<sup>63</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), p.82.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p.80,81.

<sup>65</sup> Michael Minden, *Modern German Literature* (London: Polity, 2011), p.120-121.

<sup>66</sup> Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Enquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*, tr. Rachel Gomme (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p.39.

exposure' following the thought of Robert Antelme in his post-Holocaust memoir *L'espèce humaine*.<sup>67</sup>

La mise en question de la qualité d'homme provoque une revendication presque biologique d'appartenance à l'espèce humaine. Elle sert ensuite à méditer sur les limites de cette espèce, sur sa distance à la nature et sa relation avec elle, sur une certaine solitude avec l'espèce donc.<sup>68</sup>

The disruption to humanity following absolute physical exposure issuing from traumatic historical legacies is, in my view, a major way in which ambivalent anxieties regarding complicity and victimhood in Italy and Austria are negotiated.

I explore the after-effects of World War Two and the Holocaust as they are inscribed upon a human body which can no longer be confidently defined as human. I am interested in how the experience and legacy of the war haunt literary texts, and how repetitive, compulsive and manic behaviours brought on by the confrontation with past experience permanently transform the body and mind. Whilst explorations of post-1945 Europe have focussed extensively on the translation of post-war and particularly post-Holocaust trauma into narrative, my project determines the extent to which a display of physical vulnerability and dehumanisation may provide a redemptive means of disengaging personal responsibility and historical agency, making the embodiment of trauma a cultural code for an identification as victim.<sup>69</sup> The texts and films under analysis all thematise a salient historical past, and as such negotiate what Robinson calls the 'cognitive asymmetry of present enquiry and past experience';<sup>70</sup> some recount the discreet events of that past through a traumatic and creaturely lens, others are more preoccupied with post-war legacies and the 'possession' of the post-war period by the past.<sup>71</sup> Though the scope of this study does not allow me to offer psychoanalytic readings of all the texts under discussion, throughout the thesis I suggest that Freud's concepts of the uncanny and the return of the repressed are relevant to the ways in which a salient past emerges at a bodily level. Freud notes that the word *unheimlich* meaning both 'familiar' and 'strange', which symbolises the dynamic between nation and identity, homeland and

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<sup>67</sup> Crowley, p.7.

<sup>68</sup> Robert Antelme, *L'espèce humaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), p.11.

<sup>69</sup> Dominic LaCapra in his *History and Its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2009) poses the question 'Can there ever be a "been there done that" response to problems such as trauma and violence?', p.5. Fatima Naqvi warns of 'trauma fatigue' in the humanities in her *The Literary and Cultural Rhetoric of Victimhood 1970-2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.239. See also Carolyn Janice Dean, *The Fragility of Empathy* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2004).

<sup>70</sup> Alan Robinson, *Narrating the Past: Historiography, Memory and the Contemporary Novel* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p.x.

<sup>71</sup> Caruth, p.4-5: 'to be traumatised is to be possessed by an image or event.'



subjectivity, whereby the subject is always striving to position itself within wider categories of identity, at the level of the family, the nation and humanity itself; the unsettledness of the subject is the process Freud explains as ‘das Heimliche wird dann zum Unheimliche.’<sup>72</sup> As I show, the works at hand deal with the anxiety attached to the uncanny experience of dehumanisation in the aftermath of a traumatic experience of suffering through imposed, institutional, political, structural violence.

Studies of the discursive, cultural legacies of the Holocaust and the Second World War reveal much about how the themes of guilt and memory inform the post-war German-speaking world’s engagement with its past.<sup>73</sup> Silence and forgetting also feature as powerful discursive formations that polarise investigations of the aftermath of the Second World War.<sup>74</sup> Yet, conditions of embodiment are just as revelatory of the cultural climate that brings bodies into being. The material realities of war and its aftermath make it impossible to neglect the body as a primary site of suffering (one need only think of the photographs of emaciated concentration camp prisoners and bruised children in the ruins of European capitals). But how does the body negotiate this intersection between discourse and materiality? Building on Klaus Theleweit’s *Männerphantasien* (1977) – which discusses how the male body of the Freikorps officer absorbs and propagates discourses that subjugate the body – several studies emerge in the mid-90s and early 2000s which shift the moral engagement with Nazism into the realm of the body which is seen to remember and be shaped by its history. Historian Dagmar Herzog in *Sex after Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany* (2005) traces the sexual aftermath of the fascist imagination and the extent to which the fascist body and its fantasies affected the post-war German body politic. Leslie Adelson’s 1993 *Making Bodies, Making History: Feminism and German Identity* examines the body which actively constructs its

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<sup>72</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘Das Unheimliche’ 1919 246. Multiple translations of this are possible: ‘The familiar becomes strange.’; ‘The secret is then revealed.’; ‘The familiar then becomes uncanny.’

<sup>73</sup> Arguably Karl Jaspers’ 1945-6 Heidelberg lectures titled *Die Schuldfrage* provided the first public forum to discuss issues of German guilt at an institutional level: *Die Schuldfrage: Ein Beitrag zur deutschen Frage* (Berlin: Artemis, 1947) The insistence on German guilt has recently been moderated to accommodate enquiries into the realities of German wartime suffering, see *A Nation of Victims? Representing German Wartime Suffering from 1945 to the present*, ed. by Helmut Schmitz (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007)

<sup>74</sup> Silence has often been considered the mark of a guilty national conscience in the German and Austrian context, see Davide Cesarini and Eric J. Sundqvist (eds.), *After the Holocaust: Challenging the Myth of Silence* (New York: Routledge, 2011). However, recent studies begin to question the myth of post-war silence. Studies on Italian Fascism are sparser, and the obsession with *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) cannot be mapped onto Italian explorations of the legacy of Fascism and World War Two, due to the complexity of Italy’s political landscape from 1943 onwards, which helped obfuscate issues of national guilt and responsibility. See John Foot, *Italy’s Divided Memory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) and Patrizia Dogliani, ‘Constructing Memory and Anti-Memory: Representing Fascism and its Denial in Republican Italy’ in *Fascism: History, Memory, Representation*, ed. by R.J.B Bosworth and Patrizia Dogliani (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), p.11-30.

relationship to the German past from a position of otherness, be it foreign or female. However, in this thesis which pertains to Austrian and Italian examples, a gendered understanding of embodiment will be enhanced by the notion of creaturely embodiment which defies the human/animal binary.

The after-effects of the traumatic suffering of war have a profoundly distorting effect and displace the psychological impact of trauma onto the physical body which becomes a primary site of a suffering that may no longer be confidently described as exclusively human. Paradoxically, the dehumanising and inhuman atrocities committed over the course of the Second World War lead to a post-1945 re-affirmation of humanist values, and a gathering of a human community of solidarity, ‘an identity definable only in terms of its threatened abolition.’<sup>75</sup> As Ginzburg notes in the aftermath of World War Two: ‘noi siamo legati a questa nostra angoscia e in fondo lieti del nostro destino di uomini.’<sup>76</sup> The identity crisis provoked by contact with a toxic historical legacy leads to the deployment of the body as a screen for national, subjective and intersubjective tensions, as Mohi von Känel and Steier argue: ‘Nachkriegskörper sind nicht beliebige Motive künstlerische Darstellung, sondern eröffnen einen doppelten Schauplatz krisenhafter Aushandlung.’<sup>77</sup> The post-war body conveys the ‘trianguliert[e] Aspekte der Nachträglichkeit, Wirklichkeitserfahrung und Unvertretbarkeit’ and poses the question: ‘Wie steht es um den Krieg als Zone gesteigerter Wirklichkeitserfahrung bei gleichzeitiger ästhetischer Überforderung, um die Repräsentation von Krieg und Nachkrieg als ethisches Problem?’<sup>78</sup> As Anat Pick suggests, the Holocaust ‘radically erodes human legibility’, demanding an engagement with the body and its porosity and vulnerability to the inscriptive violence of history.<sup>79</sup>

Critical studies regarding the Second World War have recently shifted towards an interpretation of the dehumanising effects of trauma which challenge the definition of the traumatised subject as unequivocally human. Indeed, the discourse of Nazism and its aftermath is permeated with animals, from the racist definition of the ‘Untermensch’ to Primo Levi’s post-Auschwitz open question ‘if this is a man...’ Boria Sax, in his study *Animals and the Third*

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<sup>75</sup> Crowley, p.8.

<sup>76</sup> Natalia Ginzburg, ‘Il figlio dell’uomo’ [1946], *Le piccole virtù* (Torino: Einaudi, 1968), pp.68-20, p.70.

<sup>77</sup> Sara Mohi von Känel, Christoph Steier, ‘Interesse am Nachkriegskörper’ in *Nachkriegskörper: Prekäre Korporealitäten in der deutschsprachigen Literatur des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by Ibid. (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2013), pp.7-16, p.9.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p.10.

<sup>79</sup> Anat Pick, *Creaturely Poetics: Vulnerability and Animality in Literature and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p.24.

*Reich: Pets, Scapegoats and the Holocaust*, discusses the appropriation of animal vocabulary by the Nazis for the sake of entrenching racist, exclusionary politics and practice. He demonstrates that ‘the rhetoric and politics of the Nazis constantly blurred the roles of animals and human beings,’ by interpreting human behaviour along animal lines.<sup>80</sup> Thus, Nazi mythology favoured (often carnivorous) predators versus weaker animals as the former were ‘closer to nature and possessed greater vitality than other creatures.’<sup>81</sup> By privileging the predator (for instance, Sax investigates the importance of the wolf in Nazi rhetoric and iconography), the Nazis accord value to power and predation against weakness and passivity, which is seen as both disgusting and threatening to the vitality of the ‘Volksgemeinschaft.’ The prey of the Third Reich’s predator was dangerous to the Nazi ideal of racial purity and therefore portrayed as repulsive. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler stated that the mission of his ‘tausendjähriges Reich’ was ‘to produce creatures made in the likeness of the Lord and not create monsters that are a mixture of man and ape.’<sup>82</sup> The persecution of perceived ‘Untermenschen’ in the name of the Reich’s racial purity and superiority sought to eliminate those who manifested, not difference altogether, but the wrong kind of differences, what Girard calls ‘la différence hors système.’<sup>83</sup> Hence, the creation of an iconography and rhetoric of exclusion in Nazi propaganda marginalised groups whose physical characteristics did not comply with the imagination of the ideal German citizen at the time; this persecution, as Boria Sax has shown, was portrayed as the predator’s hunt for its prey, and therefore anchored victims and perpetrators within the power/powerlessness binary. Thus, the persecuted undesirable becomes a victim of a mechanics of exclusion which is motivated by contradictory forces of disgust (the propaganda film *Der Ewige Jude* (1940) associates Jews with rats) and the will to exercise strength against a perceived enemy. In Agamben’s *Remnants of Auschwitz*, the concentration camp figure of the *Muselmann* as a victim of exclusionary violence is marked out as a discomfiting hybrid, whose collapse of the boundary between animal and human is both the result and symptom of his experience of violence. He ‘marks the threshold between the human and the inhuman’ to the extent that he is ‘unbearable to human eyes’.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, Martha Nussbaum, in her seminal study of the legal role of disgust, suggests that disgust stems from ‘the problematic relationship

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<sup>80</sup> Boria Sax, *Animals in the Third Reich: Pets, Scapegoats and the Holocaust* (London: Continuum, 2009), p.22.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23.

<sup>82</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, tr. James Murphy [1939]: <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks02/0200601.txt>. Last accessed: 10 February 2012.

<sup>83</sup> René Girard, *Le Bouc Émissaire* (Paris: Grasset, 1982), p.35.

<sup>84</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, tr. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone, 1999), p.57,51.

to our own animality, our vulnerability to decay and becoming waste products ourselves.’<sup>85</sup> Therefore, to examine the legacy of Nazism and Fascism is at the same time to trace the way victimhood is embodied, as well as the attachment of victimhood status to a body that collapses racial, sexual and species boundaries.

The liminal body that results from the transmission or contact with traumatic experience, be it directly lived by the sufferer or communicated through generations or cultural discourse, can be called creaturely.

### **The innocence of creatures: Redemptive victimhood in and through the body**

The idea of the ‘creature’ crystallises the juxtaposition of sublimity and abjection, humanity and inhumanity, that we encountered in the concept of trauma. The word ‘creature’ is linked etymologically to that of ‘creation’ and also bears connotations of the abject being, instrumentalised at the will of others, provoking disgust and fear. The OED defines the creature as firstly, ‘a living or animate being; an animal, often distinct from a person’; secondly, as ‘a human person or being, an individual’ who can either be described with ‘a modifying word indicating the type of person, and esp. expressing admiration, affection, compassion or commiseration,’ or as ‘a reprehensible or despicable person.’ Thirdly, it can be ‘a created thing or being.’ Finally, the creature is subservient in that it can be defined as ‘a person who is willing to do someone else’s bidding.’ Etymologically speaking, the creature therefore generates four productive lines of enquiry for this thesis: (1) the creature may be animal or human; (2) the creature invites a certain of affective response, be it positive or negative; (3) the creature is created by forces external to it; (4) the creature is subservient, as it is a ‘creation,’ having been created by something external to itself.

Here, I use the framework of creatureliness as it encompasses an experience of post-war and post-traumatic embodiment that is indicative of attitudes to the past in Austrian and Italian literature and film. In this view, I wish to adapt Behrens and Galle’s provocative investigation on the translation of creatureliness into a literary idiom, that is the multivalent deployment of the life of the biological body (‘das scheinbar Unkodierte kreatürlicher Lebensdimension in einen literarischen Kode [einzupassen]’), evoked in a corpus of texts and films which problematizes the ways in which the war creates new physicalities which are disempowered, ontologically unstable as they explode the boundaries of human and animal and

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<sup>85</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p.89.

traumatic, in that they reflect a contact, be it direct or indirect, with a superior physical force.<sup>86</sup> Creatureliness is a theoretical framework that gives insight into how the body becomes the bearer and translator of historical experience which is inscribed through corporeal interaction with and exposure to the political, the social and the cultural: hence the profound relevance of embodiment for an understanding of human beings' experience of history and intersubjectivity as well as the embodied nature of historical consciousness.

In the late 1920s, the journal *Die Kreatur* (1927-1930) debates the relationship of creatureliness to violence in the name of reconciliation of living beings and the refusal of violence (the editors were respectively Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant, thereby promoting religious dialogue and reconciliation). For the Buber, Weizsäcker and Wittig, the 'creature' relates the ideas of divine creation and the possibility of redemption. The shared experience of creation is, for the editors of *Die Kreatur*, an appeal for non-violence in the name of the shared vulnerability of all created beings. The journal's manifesto speaks out for all worldly beings that are united by the fact of their having been created and their shared vulnerability to suffering: 'This publication wishes to speak of the world – of all beings, things and all the elements that compose today's world – so that their creatureliness [*Geschöpflichkeit*] may be recognised.'<sup>87</sup> Using the word *Geschöpflichkeit* [meaning 'creatureliness' in the sense of 'having been created'], Wittig in particular emphasizes the creation's vulnerability, as well as man's tendency to exclude himself from the spectrum of creatureliness and thereby ignore the violence done to other creatures in the name of the (false) superiority of man on the hierarchy of being:

Es ist ja sehr bezeichnend, dass die Menschen geneigt sind, den Namen 'Kreatur' zu beschränken auf Steine, Pflanzen, und Tiere. [...] So sehr haben sich die Menschen erhoben über die Schöpfung; so sehr haben sich die Menschen sie selbst gestellt; so tief haben sie sich in ein übergeschöpfliches geistiges Reich hineingeträumt und hineindisputiert, dass ein langer Weg geworden ist zwischen den Menschen und der Kreatur. [...] Wenn die neue Macht, durch die wir der Erde mächtig werden sollen, stark genug

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<sup>86</sup> Rudolf Behrens and Roland Galle, 'Vorwort' in *Menschengestalten: Zur Kodierung des Kreatürlichen im modernen Roman*, ed. by Rudolf Behrens and Roland Galle (Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg 1995), pp.7-10, p.8.

<sup>87</sup> Martin Buber, Viktor von Weizsäcker and Joseph Wittig, *Die Kreatur: Eine Zeitschrift 1927-1928*, Ed. by Martin Buber, Viktor von Weizsäcker and Joseph Wittig (Berlin: Verlag Lambert Schneider), p.2. The English translation is my own. The original German reads: "Diese Zeitschrift will von der Welt - von allen Wesen, von allen Dingen, von allen Begebenheiten dieser gegenwärtigen Welt - so reden, dass ihre Geschöpflichkeit erkennbar wird."

sein wird, dann wird die Kreatur erlöst sein von der physischen Kausalität, in die wir unsere Gewalttätigkeit eingebaut haben.<sup>88</sup>

Writing in 1930, Wittig claims redemption [‘die neue Macht’] will allow man to accept his creatureliness, but that until then the dominant structures and hierarchies that govern man’s relationship to others will remain in place. Though Wittig makes an urgent plea for an end to man’s separation from creation, by deferring the collapse of this hierarchy until ‘the coming of the new power’, namely the Final Judgement, when ‘the meek will inherit the earth’, the author is in fact cementing the animal/human distinctions and the lust for domination and violence that are immanent to them as inescapable. Heidegger underscores this dynamic by associating the creature with the irrational and powerless, supposing that man is the creature whose power comes from the disavowal of his irrational passivity: ‘Kreatur [...] is a name for the living, which in contrast to the living beings that have been endowed with consciousness, i.e. man, is characteristically helpless and wretched, unable to help itself [...] it is the non-rational being in its distinction from the rational one.’<sup>89</sup> The relation of the *Kreatur* to power evokes the second framework of ‘creatureliness’ to which I contribute in this thesis, namely that of the ‘creature’ as the object and victim of biopolitical power.

Giorgio Agamben and E.L. Santner argue how the creaturely is co-opted into the administrative and political power of states and institutions, following Foucault’s influential theory of biopolitics according to which man’s creaturalty – the human body’s physical configuration – is administered by alienated and alienating forms of state management: ‘it is as managers of life and survival, of bodies and the race, that so many regimes have been able to wage so many wars, causing so many men to be killed.’<sup>90</sup> Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben identifies in the creaturely body an instance of the radical disempowerment characterising existence in modernity *after* Auschwitz. His influential concept of ‘bare life’ has given a creaturely inflection to considerations of embodiments after the Second World War. ‘Bare life’ (*la nuda vita*) is, for Agamben, a mode of existence at the margins of society translated into a complete physical exposure and disempowerment and a radical subjection to

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<sup>88</sup> Joseph Wittig: “Der Weg zur Kreatur”, *Die Kreatur: Eine Zeitschrift 1929-1930*, ed. by Martin Buber, Viktor von Weizsäcker and Joseph Wittig (Berlin: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1930), pp. 137-155, p.138. Agamben also speaks of creation and salvation as the ‘two poles of divine action’: ‘redemption is nothing other than a potentiality to create that remains pending, that turns on itself and saves itself.’ Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, tr. David Kishik (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), p.4,7.

<sup>89</sup> Martin Heidegger’s ‘Parmenides Seminar’. Cited by Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin’s Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings and Angels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p.153.

<sup>90</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, tr. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980), p.137.

a dominant, but seemingly agentless, power structure. The complete exposure of ‘bare life’ is that of ‘the human creature’ (*la nuda vita: la creatura umana*).<sup>91</sup> Agamben’s terminology of ‘bare life’ is mostly clearly explained in *Homo Sacer* where the ‘bare life’ of ‘homo sacer’ plays, according to the philosopher, ‘an essential function in modern politics’: ‘The protagonist of this book is bare life. That is, the life of homo sacer, who may be killed and yet not sacrificed.’<sup>92</sup> Vulnerable to violence, and unredemptive, the constellation of concepts ‘bare life’, ‘the human creature’ and ‘homo sacer’ refer to the way in which ‘state power makes man as a living being into its own specific object’, creating a mode of existence that is completely exposed: it is a biological concept of life (*zoë*), as opposed to a meaningful kind of life in society (*bios*).<sup>93</sup>

The biopolitical taxonomy of creatureliness, then, encloses overlapping concerns for a vulnerability to violence which in the former bears redemptive possibilities in relation to the totality of divine creation and in the latter denotes the radical disempowerment or fracture at the heart of modern existence. Santner expands on this in his 2006 work *On Creaturely Life*, a work that crystallises the constellation of creatureliness, trauma and victimhood. According to Santner, a creaturely body is one that has begun to exist in ways that are precarious, liminal and subject to collapse as a result of exposure to State power. For Santner, creatureliness as a ‘specifically human way of finding oneself caught in the midst of antagonisms in and of the political field.’<sup>94</sup> It is a mode of exposure particular to the human being that embodies his/her vulnerability to political power; in this sense, Santner defines ‘creatureliness’ as ‘a biopolitical animation that distinguishes the human from the animal.’<sup>95</sup> Indeed, Santner explicitly states that the creaturely is not applicable to animals, and I agree. The animals I explore in this thesis are heavily anthropomorphised (as I show in my chapter on Elsa Morante) and are therefore used as screens onto which the abject embodiment of human victimhood and powerlessness can be projected. Echoing Levi-Strauss’ notion that animals are ‘good to think [with]’, Steve Baker notes ‘our ideas about animals help frame our human identity.’<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Mezzi senza fine* (Milano: Bollati, 1996), p.24.

<sup>92</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, tr. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p.8.

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*, p.9: ‘modern democracy presents itself from the beginning as a vindication and liberation of *zoë*, and that it is constantly trying to transform its own bare life into a way of life, and to find... the *bios* of *zoë*.’

<sup>94</sup> Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006), p.xix.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* p.39.

<sup>96</sup> Cited by Rod Preece, *Animals and Nature* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1999), p.232; Steve Baker’s *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity and Representation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), p.6.

The traumas of historical and political violence are inscribed upon and expressed by the body which expresses these in a ‘creaturely way’. Hence, the creaturely body is ‘an index of a traumatic kernel around which the “ego life” of the other has, at some level, been (dis)organised.’<sup>97</sup> This disorganisation of the ego-life is involuntarily embodied as ‘cringe’, as altered, non-anthropomorphic physicality, as a Girardian ‘signe victimaire.’<sup>98</sup> With the cringe – a bent-over or distorted posture – the body testifies to its liminality between human and inhuman, which is experienced as a traumatic collapse of boundaries.<sup>99</sup> Although Santner does not explicitly relate his concept of ‘creaturely life’ to a physicality of post-war trauma, his discussion of W.G. Sebald’s novels indicates a conflation of the creaturely, bodily cringe with a type of trauma that arises from the violence of historical events. Santner’s work is particularly useful as it explicitly links suffering to a liminal embodiment which negotiates the animal/human divide.

Hence, as I have shown, the term ‘creaturely’ is important to my enquiry in the following ways: (1) a creature is a self that is no longer sovereign, but rather reactive to the structural violence to which it is exposed; (2) The creaturely is a form of embodiment that indexes the degree of traumatisation of an individual to the extent that they can no longer confidently be described as human; (3) The creaturely is a form of subjectivity, in the sense of being a subject through the experience of subjection. ‘The creature’, illustrated by Simon Critchley ‘is that being who is always in a relation of dependence to and distinction from the alterity of a creator, and it thus introduces a passivity into the heart of subjectivity.’<sup>100</sup> Through the experience of creatureliness, a form of subjectivity emerges that reflects an experience of vulnerability to suffering and violence; equally, the creature is subjected to external forces that define its very physicality and self-expression. I argue that the creaturely is a favoured literary and filmic trope to inflect the privilege of the victim position.

Yet, both the theological and biopolitical inflections of creatureliness pose a serious problem, namely that of agency, and as I demonstrate in the body of my thesis, the reliance on the trope of the creaturely mobilises the disconnection of historical events and individual lives

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<sup>97</sup> E.L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006), p.xii.

<sup>98</sup> René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, tr. by Stephen Bamm and Michael Meteer (London: Continuum, 2003), p.103.

<sup>99</sup> Dominick LaCapra uses the word ‘traumatropism’ to define posttraumatic embodiment as a result of experience and identification with the Second World War in his introduction to his chapter on trauma in *History and its Limits* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2009). He uses the OED definition of ‘traumatropism’: ‘a particular growth or curvature of an organism (esp. A plant) resulting from a wound’, p.59.

<sup>100</sup> Simon Critchley, *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French theory* (London: Verso, 1999), p.68.



whereby all those involved are portrayed as suffering from a structural trauma in which they are powerless to intervene. In this sense, I distinguish this study from Anat Pick's in *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film*. Here, Pick exalts the conflation of suffering and aesthetics, and her argument revolves around the necessity to do justice to the inherent vulnerability and beauty of life, without falling into an anthropocentric mode of describing animals. Based on the writings of Simon Weil on vulnerability, Pick writes about the urgency of moving beyond a conception of animals as 'pure necessity, material bodies pitted against human mindfulness and soulfulness.'<sup>101</sup> She calls 'the critical practice', 'the modality Weil names *attention* [...] to the bodily and embodied' creaturely.'<sup>102</sup> Whilst I agree with her that an exploration of 'the Holocaust's disavowed animality is central to the ethics of memory,' in that the anxiety surrounding the nature of the human and its separation from the animal is central to an engagement with the violence of World War Two and the Holocaust, Pick's thesis that creatureliness is a form of disempowering exposure with inherent ethical value inviting compassion is one I take issue with.<sup>103</sup> By valorising dehumanisation as a destruction of the hierarchies that found man as a superior being able to wield violence on lesser creatures, Pick does not propose a satisfactory solution to the problem of agency, a crucial problem in the valorisation of post-war creatureliness and victimhood. Her emphasis on the exposure and potential victimisation of the those who register as less-than-human or animal – 'when it comes to animals, power operates with the fewest obstacles'<sup>104</sup> – this fragility is transformed into a potential for non-redemptive suffering revealing how the vulnerability inherent to all forms of embodiment is deployed to disconnect agency from historical processes, resulting in a problematic conflation of creaturely embodiment's traumatic potential for suffering with victimhood.

How are we invited to respond to the creature? An investment in powerlessness can betray an overindulgence in passivity and suffering, whereas a disgust for this powerlessness may unnervingly reveal the reproduction of totalitarian exaltations of violence and exclusion of weak, vulnerable others. The way we are invited to respond to the liminal post-war body, between animal and human, victims and brutalisers, reveals a particular cultural investment in

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<sup>101</sup> Pick, p.4.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6; Following Weil, Pick writes 'If fragility and finitude possess a special kind of beauty, this conception of beauty is already inherently ethical', p.3.

<sup>104</sup> p.15.

discourses of victimhood or national guilt, depending on the level of discomfort that this collapse precipitates.

Karl Schoonover asked this important question in *Brutal Vision: The Neorealist Body in Postwar Italian Cinema* which advances the theory that post-war Italian cinema relies on ‘brutal humanism’ defined as ‘compelling the audience to recognize the ethical obligations of the human community by exhibiting bodies susceptible to physical injury.’<sup>105</sup> By contextualising neorealism within a post-war global order that requires its citizenry to invest emotionally and financially in large-scale international aid, from the Marshall Plan to the liberal charity schemes of NGOs, he argues that the victim status of bodies emerges in states of ‘spectacular suffering.’<sup>106</sup> Schoonover therefore demonstrates victimhood and suffering as politically salient discourses that provoke empathetic responses and invite financial compensation. Yet is empathy a necessary linear response to spectacular suffering?

In his resonant memoir of the horrors of the Holocaust, Primo Levi’s *Se questo è un uomo* examines the dehumanisation at the heart of the experience of the concentration camp. Dr Pannwitz, who oversees Levi’s chemistry examination, enabling him to work at the IG-Farben factory during his internment at Auschwitz, looks at the narrator in such a way that the inmate and chemist begins to doubt his humanity: ‘quello sguardo non corse fra due uomini; e se io sapessi spiegare a fondo la natura di quello sguardo, scambiato come attraverso le pareti di vetro di un acquario tra due esseri che abitano mezzi diversi, avrei anche spiegato l’essenza della grande follia della terza Germania.’<sup>107</sup> The inmates see their bodies transformed into unrecognizable, distorted hungry figures, but a translation between the prisoner’s self-observation and an empathetic reaction by the onlooker is not self-evident. Dr Pannwitz is disgusted by Levi’s abject appearance, and thus, in Levi’s understanding, the process whereby the Jews were turned into beasts so that they could fulfill the prophecies of Nazi propaganda in which they were referred to as the vermin-like menace to the Third Reich, is crucial to an understanding of the absurdity of the dehumanising machine that was the Holocaust and Hitler’s persecutory regime. Compare Dr Pannwitz’s icy disdain for Levi’s subjectification with the famous passage in which the last Auschwitz inmates are liberated by the Red Army at the beginning of *La Tregua*. In the face of the Lager, full of ‘nudi impotenti, inermi’, Levi

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<sup>105</sup> Karl Schoonover, *Brutal Vision: The Neorealist Body in Postwar Italian Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), p.182.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xvii,xix.

<sup>107</sup> Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo; La Tregua* (Torino: Einaudi, 1989), p.95.

describes the soldiers' awkward approach to the remaining prisoners: they exchange 'parole brevi e timide', their faces show 'uno strano imbarazzo.' Far from being inspired by righteousness to save the wretched prisoners, the Soviet soldiers 'apparivano oppressi, oltre che da pietà, da un confuso ritegno [...] che avvinceva i loro occhi allo scenario funereo.'<sup>108</sup> Levi interprets their reserve as 'pudore' and 'vergogna' which he compares to his own feelings when he was spared the infamous selections and he saw his companions go to their deaths.<sup>109</sup> Shame and 'pudore' (reserve, humility) in the face of what the writer calls the offence ('offesa'), committed by the Nazis in the Lager are the only appropriate responses according to Levi. However, the soldiers' reticence, that Levi hopes to read as a manifestation of a shared human shame at the possibility of the existence of Auschwitz, may also be interpreted as a reiteration of Dr Pannwitz's uncomprehending and uncompassionate stare: the soldiers may be turning their heads to avoid looking at the filthy masses of sick and malnourished inmates, their inhuman appearance and their squalid conditions. Thus, the depiction of a human being's transformed embodiment as a result of violence, war and totalitarianism reveals attitudes to metamorphosed human beings who have been subjected to the violent will of others, inviting emotional responses that can be interpreted as empathetic, or disgusted. Levi takes for granted that the soldiers feel a humiliating pity at the sight of the wretched *Häftlinge*, yet they may in fact be restraining themselves from a more visceral, base reaction to their disgusting and inhuman appearance. Therefore, dehumanization is not necessarily an intrinsic physical quality, but an emotional response residing in the perception of the non-victimised onlooker (be he horrified, compassionate, disgusted) which in turn gives significance to the body transformed by violence.

### **The vicissitudes of victimhood**

Creatureliness complicates and subjectivises contentious national discourses of victimhood or perpetration in post-war Italy and Austria. In the works I explore, the authors' portrayals of their subjects' signs of victimhood problematise the privileging of the victim's position in representations of the Second World War and the Holocaust. When dealing with such messy and toxic political and cultural legacies as Nazism, Fascism and the Holocaust, the victim's position is privileged as an enviable state of blamelessness and redemption though the

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<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p.158.

<sup>109</sup> 'Era la stessa vergogna a noi ben nota, quella che ci sommergeva dopo le selezioni [...] la vergogna che i tedeschi non conobbero, quella che il giusto prova davanti alla colpa commessa da altrui', p.158.

deculpabilising exposure and subjection to the violence of others. As we shall see, victimhood and dehumanisation are analogous experiences in many literary accounts of historical violence. For instance, Guido Zernatto, a Jewish exile from Austria, talked about his persecution at the hands of the violence of the state in the following terms: ‘ich bin hier verloren / wie ein Waldtier, dass in den Winternächten schreit.’<sup>110</sup> The creaturely embodiment of victimhood chimes with René Girard’s association of victimhood with certain physical traits that tend to polarise persecutors. In his investigation of the scapegoat, Girard states that ‘les victimes sont choisies non en fonction de leurs crimes mais de leurs signes victimaires.’<sup>111</sup> He lists the disabled, children, women and prisoners of war among privileged scapegoats or ‘victims’, and he insists that reasons for persecuting particular individuals or groups are informed by social habits linked to unsettling differences which cannot be reconciled with the identity of a larger collective: ‘lorsqu’un groupe humain a pris l’habitude de choisir ses victimes dans une certaine catégorie sociale, ethnique, religieuse, il tend à lui attribuer les infirmités ou les difformités qui renforceraient la polarisation victimaire si elles étaient réelles.’<sup>112</sup> Even if the deformities ascribed to a group are merely rhetorical, they function as though they were real and therefore entrench revulsion against the group, which enforces its victimhood status. Post-war Italian and Austrian literature and film teems with the unsettling ‘signes victimaires’ of beings who cannot comfortably be described as human or groups whose abject marginalisation from the dominant social order underlines their victim status within a given society.

‘Victim’ derived from the Latin ‘victima’ juxtaposes the creaturely vulnerability to traumatisation and violence that I outline above in that creatureliness belies a potential for subjection to suffering and therefore for victimhood. Indeed, the Oxford English Dictionary defines the victim firstly as ‘a living creature killed and offered as a sacrifice to some deity or supernatural power.’ Its 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century redemptive connotations stem from its application to Christ. More recent applications of the term emphasise the subjective experience of suffering as subjection, as one ‘who is subjected to torture by another’ or ‘to an oppressive and destructive agency.’ Etymologically, then, victimhood reflects the redemptive suffering of the creature as well as the passivity inherent to the experience of being made a victim. Fatima

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<sup>110</sup> Franz Kain, ‘Es war einmal ein Plan oder Die siebenneckigen Meilensteine der Gegenreformation’ in *Was wird das Ausland dazu sagen* ed. by Gerhard Leitner (Wien: Picus, 1995), pp.34-45(p.37).

<sup>111</sup> Girard, 1982, p.34. ‘Victims are not chosen based upon their crimes but upon their signs of victimhood’ (my trans)

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p.32. ‘When any human group has become used to choosing its victims in a particular social, ethnic, religious category, it tends to attribute to them the deformities and infirmities that would enforce this group’s [of ‘victims’] definition as victim if they were real’ (my trans).

Naqvi's illuminating study of discourses of victimhood in Germany, Austria and France argues that 'a persistent anxiety about victims and victimhood has been present in a variety of cultural manifestations over the past thirty years.'<sup>113</sup> For Naqvi, victimhood is a discursive response to social fragmentation as a result of war and the alienating impact of modernity and consumerism; narratives of victimhood 'create a tenuous affiliation within a radically atomised society.'<sup>114</sup> My analysis builds upon Naqvi's in that I argue that the urge to self-identify with a nationally redemptive discourse of victimhood is not apparent primarily at the discursive or cognitive level in the corpus of texts and films I examine but at the level of the body. Furthermore, Sykes emphasises how the victim as a political category actually impedes moral judgement due to the political prioritisation of the empowerment of victims at all costs.<sup>115</sup> Focussing on the particular implications of the privileging of an embodied victimhood in the aftermath of the Holocaust, hence on a more specific set of post-war circumstances than Naqvi's approach to the theme in post-modernity, I note her persuasion that 'victim rhetoric is [...] geographically spread', and argue that an attentiveness to the trope of the creaturely in an examination of Austrian and Italian literature and film after 1945 crystallises the hopes, anxieties and investments attached to the notion of victimhood.<sup>116</sup>

However, following Alison Cole, I do not wish to undermine the discourse of victimhood itself which is an important safeguard of individual and collective liberties as well as a regulator of political and institutional power. Cole rightly warns against the deployment of what she calls 'anti-victimism' to anti-feminist and racist ends. Her diagnosis of the state of victimhood in contemporary US politics is that the term is used to 'suppress, ridicule and condemn,' in reaction to the political right's critique of those who seek to 'ascribe themselves the status of victims, to try to find something else or someone else to blame for whatever is wrong or incomplete or just plain unpleasant in their lives.'<sup>117</sup> Anti-victimism, Cole argues, always locates victim discourse within a collective that seeks to undermine the rights and autonomy of the individual. Therefore, anti-victimists do not do justice to individual experiences of suffering, seeing them instead as symptoms of a wider threat to the stability of the capitalist,

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<sup>113</sup> Fatima Naqvi, *The Literary and Cultural Rhetoric of Victimhood in Western Europe 1970-2005* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.1.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>115</sup> Charles Sykes, *A Nation of Victims: The Decline of the American Character* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992), p.16: 'For many Americans, the politics of victimisation has taken the place of more traditional expressions of morality and equality.'

<sup>116</sup> Naqvi, p.3.

<sup>117</sup> Alyson Cole, *The Cult of True Victimhood* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p.2.

patriarchal nation.<sup>118</sup> Cole notes that it is crucial to problematize the colonisation of the personal by the political in her case studies, quoting political theorist Shklar's notion that victimhood is 'something that happens to us, not a quality.'<sup>119</sup> Stringer also cautions against 'anti-victim' talk that constitutes 'victimhood as a matter of personal responsibility, psychology and will, endorsing a fundamental conception of victimhood as [...] an unhealthy attitude of resentment brought on by an individual's lack of personal responsibility, rather than a circumstance occasioned by wider social forces and the workings of power.'<sup>120</sup> As Stringer's, Cole's and Naqvi's studies demonstrate, victimhood has high political stakes and far exceeds its surface value as the psychological result of the experience of suffering. As LaCapra notes, 'victim is not a psychological category. It is, in variable ways, a social, political and ethical category.'<sup>121</sup> Given Enn's persuasive creaturely definition of the victim as 'one who has been intentionally harmed by another, either physically or psychologically, whether directly or indirectly',<sup>122</sup> I argue that discussing victimhood through a creaturely lens enables an analysis of the literary tropes that permeate post-war Austrian and Italian literature and emphasise the undigested complicities regarding the Second World War at the level of the body, whose referential instability and creatureliness become vectors for the attitudes toward victimhood in the aftermath of 1945. The nexus of creatureliness and victimhood is, in my view, a productive mode of inquiring after the reverberations of war and complicities with the Third Reich in Italy and Austria. My choice of corpus was based on my curiosity about the ubiquitous emphasis on the animal qualities of a dehumanised individual who displayed the characteristics of being entrapped and oppressed by a historically-conditioned situation in which he/she is powerless to intervene. Secondly, I selected texts that, in addition to the presence of creaturely human figures, either engage with the Second World War or the legacy of fascism in ways that I find indicative about the reverberations of these events in Austria and Italy. Thirdly, I explore well-known texts to add to previous interpretations by bringing together the unexplored connection of the creaturely figuration of the human body and the repercussions of such a representation for ideas of national identity in Italy and Austria.

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<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.

<sup>119</sup> Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p.17. Cited by Cole, p.8.

<sup>120</sup> Rebecca Stringer, *Knowing Victims: Feminism and Victim Politics in Neoliberal Times* (London: Routledge, 2014), p.2-3.

<sup>121</sup> LaCapra, 2000, p.80.

<sup>122</sup> Diane Enns, *The Violence of Victimhood* (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 2012), p.10.

## Literature review

While several monographs discuss the aftermath of World War Two and the discomfiting realities of Austrian complicity, there has never been a comparative, thematic study of the constellation of creaturely embodiment as an expression of vicarious traumatising identifying with a privileged victim position in Austria and Italy. In this sense, my work builds on several important volumes. *From High Priests to Desecrators: Austrian Writers Confront the Past* discusses the ways in which writers address Austria's past from the Habsburg heritage to the Nazi past and how oppositional stances within the cultural establishment emerge.<sup>123</sup> *Out From The Shadows: Austrian Literature and Film Created by Women* examines the renaissance of Austrian women's literature and cinema highlighting controversial feminist approaches to the Austrian establishment, its past and its politics.<sup>124</sup> The special edition of *New German Critique: Austrian Writers Confront the Past 1945-2000* analyses how Austrian playwrights and writers (such as Bernhard, Jelinek and Handke, among others) problematise the past and turn the victimhood myth on its head.<sup>125</sup> In relation to this Gertraud Steiner's *Die Heimat-Macher: Kino in Österreich 1946-1966* (Wien: Verlag für Gesellschaftskritik, 1987) explores the role of cinema in the elaboration of a post-war national identity based on traditional values which exalted the beauty of Austrian landscapes and the moral integrity of village life.<sup>126</sup> 'Heimat' and topography are the focus of two important studies which examine the traces of an undigested historical legacy of World War Two in the physical landscapes and domestic spaces of post-war Austria: Katya Krylova's *Walking through History: Topography and Identity in the works of Ingeborg Bachmann and Thomas Bernhard* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2012), like Heidi M. Schlipphacke's *Nostalgia after Nazism* (see above, 2010), discusses the nostalgia for the lost Habsburg heritage as well as the anxieties relating to the home and the Heimat in the novels of Thomas Bernhard and Ingeborg Bachmann.

Monographs dealing with the legacy of Fascism and the Holocaust in literary and film cultures are slowly beginning to emerge, though Italian *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is more fragmented than the current state of Austrian criticism. A notable example is Cristina della Colletta's *Plotting the Past: Metamorphoses of Historical Fiction in Modern Italian Narrative*

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<sup>123</sup> *From High Priests to Desecrators: Austrian Writers Confront the Past*, ed. by Ricarda Schmidt, Moray McGowan (Bloomsbury: T&T Clark, 1993)

<sup>124</sup> Margarete Lamb-Faffelberger, *Out From The Shadows: Austrian Literature and Film Created by Women* (Riverside: Ariadne, 1997)

<sup>125</sup> See *Austrian Writers Confront the Past 1945-2000*, *New German Critique* 93:2004.

<sup>126</sup> Gertraud Steiner, *Die Heimat – Macher: Kino in Österreich 1946-1966* (Wien: Verlag für Gesellschaftskritik, 1987)

(Lafayette: Purdue, 1996): this book examines four literary works in light of Manzoni's essay *Del Romanzo Storico* in order to elucidate the development of the historical novel across varying ideological and historical frameworks from the late 19<sup>th</sup> until the late 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This book is theoretically informed by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century realist debate about the possibility of merging fiction and fact within the novel. The book does not engage with the Second World War explicitly and in her chapter on *La Storia*, della Colletta argues that Morante engages in critical historiography which critiques patriarchal authority and highlights the victimising mechanisms at work within society. This book neglects the novel's privileging of victims and therefore does not do justice to the complexity of Italy's uneasy relationship to World War Two. Conversely, Emiliano Perra's *Conflicts of Memory: The Reception of Holocaust Films and TV Programmes in Italy from 1945 to the present* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010) examines the myths and political and national agendas which informed the understanding of the Holocaust in its cultural manifestations. Whilst the conflict between Catholicism and Communism informs most of Perra's research, a major aspect of this monograph is the culture of victimhood which underpins the reception of the Holocaust in Italy. Perra shows how the reception of visual culture pertaining to the Holocaust was filtered through this myth in order to avoid discussing how Italy actively participated in the Holocaust. Risa Sodi's *Narrative and Imperative: The First Fifty Years of Holocaust Writing* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007) traces the legacy of the Holocaust in Italian documentary and fictional writing from 1944 to 1994. She contextualises her argument by examining the relationship of Italian Jews to their homeland and vice-versa and presents a taxonomy of Italian Holocaust writing according to genre and content. She argues that Italian Holocaust writing responds to the imperative to recount this seminal event in Italian history, as well as writing on behalf of women as the oppressed victims of history. Sodi's victim-centric account, while providing illuminating readings of the texts, does not throw light onto the reception of these writings in the Italian cultural mainstream. Millicent Marcus's *Italian Film in the Shadow of Auschwitz* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002) traces the development of Holocaust memory in Italy through the representation of the extermination of the Jews in film. For Marcus, the compulsion to return to the Holocaust is symptomatic of Italy's mourning work 'as a result of traumatic shock' (17), which she examines in light of Freud's theory of the 'return of the repressed' and the need to mend Italy's broken sense of community post-war. Like Sodi, Marcus also notes that directors use the theme



of the Holocaust to express their own agendas, as well as the changing politics of contemporary Italy, where themes pertaining to the Holocaust inflect problems with racism and integration.<sup>127</sup>

## Chapter outline

The thesis is divided into four chapters. The first compares Carlo Levi's *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (1945) and Thomas Bernhard's *Frost* (1963) and assesses human existence on the margins of the State and the question of how the workings of history are connected to individual lives. First, I argue that the trope of the 'creaturely' can be used to examine the bio-political entrapment of the body by political and institutional power, crucial to an understanding of how embodiment reflects the threat posed to human integrity by war and totalitarianism in the early post-war period. Secondly, I show how the narrators' stake in the depiction of the link between embodiment and historical consciousness is indicative of a causal connection of the workings of history to the human body or an immunisation of individuals against the historical process. Further to this, the importance of the trope of the creaturely belies investments in historical passivity conveyed through the human body's disempowerment, revealing much about uncomfortable complicities and complicated historical legacies in Italy and Austria.

The second part of the thesis deciphers the inscriptions of history on the creaturely body which encompasses an overview of Elsa Morante's animals and children in *La Storia*. Morante's works problematize the messianic innocence of the 'creature', the being created by motherhood and divine creation, always at the mercy of the vicissitudes of what she calls 'la storia – uno scandalo che dura da diecimila anni.'<sup>128</sup> Creatureliness is a key interpretive word for a reading of *La Storia*: sacrifice, redemption and suffering are modes of interpreting history in Morante's bestseller, and my chapter critiques Morante's problematic focus on weak, highly anthropomorphised animal or infirm characters in her analysis of History, which is inherently victimising and the implications of this in Morante's elaboration of Italian national identity for which an understanding of space will be crucial.

In the third chapter, the experience of wartime and its aftermath in Austria and Italy are perceived through the material transmission of history through motherhood and maternal generation and its creaturely repercussions. In other words, I deal with the embodied maternal

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<sup>127</sup> See, for example, Flavia Brisio-Skov's *Popular Italian Cinema: Culture and Politics in a post-war Society* (London: Tauris, 2011) is a collection of essays focussed on post-1945 cinema without a direct relation to the experience of the Second World War.

<sup>128</sup> Elsa Morante, *La Storia* (Torino: Einaudi, 1974). Front cover. I will be using the 1995 edition which no longer features this subtitle.

transmission of the past, where I emphasise the importance of the notion of creatureliness as the fact of having been ‘created’ by a maternal creator. Elisabeth Reichart’s *Februarschatten* (1984) and Anna Mitgutsch’s *Die Züchtigung* (1982) both examine the visceral legacies of Nazism in post-war Austria and explore the violent past through a creaturely lens: the fleshy, atomised material bodies of mothers and daughters in the two texts move between a disempowering identification with animals in a refusal of their historical agency, and a confrontation with the mother as a creative force offset against claims of powerlessness, victimhood and impotence. The chapter also tries to disentangle the automatic linkage of suffering with victimhood and focuses on an ethics of care for multiple historical identities. The focus on the interlocutor representing experiences of past degradation leads to my exploration of testimonial writing in the final chapter.

The fourth and final part of the thesis encompasses a comparative study of selected short stories by Ilse Aichinger and Primo Levi, the focus of which is how the human/animal boundary inflects the experience of exclusion, persecution and victimhood. I draw from texts in Aichinger’s *Der Gefesselte* and *Eliza, Eliza* collections, featuring stories written from 1948 to 1951, and from 1961 to 1963 respectively, which raise salient parallels with Levi’s interrogation of organic life in his *Storie Naturali*. Though published together for the first time in 1966, most of the *Storie Naturali* appeared from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, suggesting a significant overlap with the writing of *Se questo è un uomo* and *La Tregua*, both explicit reflections on Levi’s internment in Auschwitz.<sup>129</sup> As the only two writers in the thesis whose works inflect their own experiences of racial persecution, it is significant that Aichinger and Levi’s engagement with the Holocaust in Austria and Italy not only overlaps but also relies on the language of animals to reflect on an experience of dehumanisation and racial exclusion, warranting the first comparative study of their works. Creatureliness in Aichinger and Levi becomes a multivalent experience in their texts, at once a valorisation of modes of existence beyond differential categories and an anxiety-provoking, degrading and violent transformation of an organic form.

In the conclusion, I explore how two filmic examples expand the field of discussion with reference to Liliana Cavani’s *Il portiere di notte* (1974) and Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975). The trope of creatureliness in its visual embodiments link the issue of degradation to those of spectatorship, consumerism and the

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<sup>129</sup> See Lucie Benhouicha, *Primo Levi: Rewriting the Holocaust* (Leicester, Troubador, 2006), p.38.

embeddedness of aesthetics, culture and politics through the appropriation of the body into this economy.

## **Chapter 1: Hinterländer, historical consciousness and humanism in Carlo Levi's *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (1945) and Thomas Bernhard's *Frost* (1963).**

In this chapter, I compare the link between historical consciousness, human embodiment and the impact and legacy of Nazi-Fascism and war in Carlo Levi's *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (*Christ Stopped at Eboli*, 1945) and *Frost* by Thomas Bernhard (1963).<sup>130</sup> At first glance, Levi and Bernhard's texts bear certain similarities: *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* is a memoir, published in 1945, of the author's political exile to the remote Southern region of Lucania (present-day Basilicata) between September 1935 and May 1936. The narrator's year in the region enables him to reflect on the crisis of the peasant population who are existentially and geographically marginalised from the centres of political power, and on the role of the Fascism and the Italian state. As a doctor and painter, Levi encounters the peasants through the practices of healing and representation, and engages in an intimate exploration of the social and existential condition of the peasants living in a world in which 'non vi è alcun limite sicuro a quello che è umano verso il mondo misterioso degli animali e dei mostri' ('there is no certain limit to that which is human as opposed to the mysterious world of animals and monsters', 98). In *Frost*, a young doctor is sent to the Austrian Pongau region on a practical assignment ('Famulatur') by his superior, namely to pose as a lawyer in order to observe his superior's brother, a painter, and report on his physical and mental condition. Over the course of twenty-seven days and six letters, the doctor reports on the painter Strauch but also on the legacy of fascism and war on the inhabitants in the inhospitable landscape of Weng.

Bernhard and Levi's entire *oeuvres* are preoccupied with the history of Austria and Italy respectively, as well as the nature of the State and the role and legacy of Nazi-Fascism perceived altogether as a crisis of civilisation.<sup>131</sup> The Lucanian peasants are engaged in a daily struggle for survival, and exploited by the political, social and economic structures that govern them. Levi describes them as having no historical consciousness whatsoever, as they are

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<sup>130</sup> Carlo Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (Torino: Einaudi, 2010); Thomas Bernhard, *Frost* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1963). All subsequent references to the texts in brackets. *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* has been abbreviated to *Cristo*. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations mine.

<sup>131</sup> See Levi's article 'Crisi di civiltà', first published in *Nazione del Popolo*, 12/13 December 1944 in which he talks about 'la civiltà dissociata, che ora muore del suo dissidio' ('dislocated society, now dying of its disintegration'). Republished in Carlo Levi, *Coraggio dei miti. Scritti contemporanei 1922-1974* (Bari: De Donato, 1975), pp.52-54. Maier has summed up Thomas Bernhard's aesthetic as depicting 'die erstarrte Grimasse einer großen Geschichte, der Zerfall, die Korruption eines kleinen Landes' (the frozen grimace of an encompassing history, the decay, the corruption of a small country) in Wolfgang Maier, 'Die Abstraktion vor ihrem Hintergrund gesehen' in *Über Thomas Bernhard*, ed. by Anneliese Botond (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), pp.11-23, p.12-13.

imprisoned ‘in quell’altro mondo, serrato nel dolore e negli usi, negato alla Storia e allo Stato [...] dove il contadino vive [...] la sua immobile civiltà’ (‘in that other world, trapped in pain and in its customs, barred from History and the State [...], where the peasant lives out [...] his immobile civiltà,’3). Levi’s text ambiguously relates the peasants’ existence to the oppression of Italian Fascism and simultaneously excludes them from the historical situation of which they are nonetheless a product. Conversely, in *Frost*, Strauch the painter correlates the miserable living conditions and the hostility of the landscape to the decline of the Habsburg Empire and the toxic legacy of Nazism and the Second World War, accounting for the cycle of brutality and suffering in Weng: ‘Hier hat jeder Stein für mich eine Menschengeschichte [...] Alles ist hier an ein Menschenverbrechen gekettet, an eine Mißhandlung, an den Krieg, an irgendeinem infamen Zugriff’ (44: ‘Every stone here has a human history for me. [...] Everything here is linked to a human crime, to an abuse, to the war, to some kind of abhorrent intervention’). Like Levi’s peasants, Bernhard’s Alpine dwellers have no access to their history (‘Der Krieg war zu Ende als sie zu denken anfangen. Sie wissen nichts vom Krieg, sie wissen nichts’/‘The war was over when they began to think. They know nothing about the war, they know nothing’, 45) which perpetuates its legacy on their bodies and existential condition: ‘Sie sind alle Kronzeugen der großen Verbrechen’ (44: ‘They are all prime witnesses of the great crimes’). The peasants of Lucania and the mountain-dwellers of Weng embody the biopolitical entrapment of the individual placing her at odds with Western rationalist conceptions of humanity which reveals much about attitudes to politics, the State and the Nazi-Fascist past in *Cristo* and *Frost*. This raises further questions as to the nature of victimhood through the impossibility of political participation, an issue that crystallises the legacies of Fascism, Nazism and the Second World War in Levi and Bernhard’s texts. Nevertheless, as I will make clear in the body of this chapter, *Frost* and *Cristo* have radically different narrative stances: the competing unreliable narrators of *Frost* diverge from the hegemonic authoritative voice of Levi’s narrator; this narrative difference will have significant interpretative repercussions in that the ethnographic gaze of *Cristo*’s narrator may evince an idealisation of this impossibility of political participation, whereas the fractured prism that *Frost* is transmitted through problematizes the desirability of victimhood and lack of agency. Plus, some argue that Levi’s *Cristo* is not a novel at all, but rather an autobiographical sketch. Following Brian Moloney, ‘in so far as Carlo Levi is a conscious literary artist, shaping and ordering his material (and, in the process, taking liberties with the facts of his biography) in order to produce his effects,

*Cristo* can for our purposes be treated as a novel.’<sup>132</sup> Thus, I aim to compare these authors’ treatment of existential conditions on the political and geographical margins of the State, to assess their representation of the continuous struggle to connect the workings of history with individual lives.

I will argue the following in this chapter: firstly, that the trope of the ‘creaturely’ is crucial to understand how embodiment conveys the dehumanisation, that is, the threat posed to human integrity by war and totalitarianism in the early post-war period. Secondly, I show how the narrators’ stake in the depiction of the link between embodiment and historical consciousness is indicative of a desire either to connect the workings of history to the human body or insulate individuals from the historical process. Further to this, the importance of the trope of the creaturely belies investments in historical passivity which becomes significant when we consider the uncomfortable complicities and complicated historical legacies that Levi and Bernhard engage with in their texts in a sensitive immediate post-war period. Indeed, Levi is writing in the aftermath of the Italian armistice and on the eve of the liberation of Florence and Bernhard’s text stems from the first decade of Austrian independence following war and occupation. As I will show, the treatment of the disenfranchised population of the Italian and Austrian provinces by the narrator-doctors reveals how the figure of the creature either invites or repels a ‘humanist’ response which has much to say about the deployment of the suffering body in the elaboration of attitudes toward national identity. The depiction of the animalised and primitive inhabitants in Levi and Bernhard’s texts galvanize affective reactions on the part of the narrator and the presumed reader; this enables us to gauge not only attitudes to marginalisation and difference, but equally to the portrayal of the human as not fully human and therefore deprived of historical consciousness and effective political agency. As we will see by comparing *Frost* and *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, the collapse of the human/animal boundary in the figure of the creature can on the one hand appeal to compassion on the grounds of vulnerability and innocence and may inoculate the ‘historyless’, naturalised creature from the contamination of history, but on the other hand cements the distance between the narrator/reader and the marginalised, passive other, who becomes a symptom of the corrupting power of history.

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<sup>132</sup> Brian Moloney, *Italian Novels of Peasant Crisis: 1930-1950* (Dublin: Four Corners Press, 2005), p.32.

## The humanistic reception of Carlo Levi's *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*:

Carlo Levi's memoir *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, written during the German occupation of Florence between December 1943 and July 1944 and published by Einaudi in 1945, is both the account of the author's period of political exile in Aliano in Lucania in Southern Italy from 1935 to 1936 as well as an analysis of a community in crisis at the margins of the Italian state in the second decade since the advent of Fascism on the threshold of the Second World War. Levi was banished to the remote, malarial region of Lucania for his role in the *Giustizia e Libertà* movement and for his involvement in the anti-Fascist press, namely in Piero Gobetti's *La Rivoluzione Liberale* from 1922 onwards.<sup>133</sup> During the time of writing he was also an active member of Italy's Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale (CLN: National Liberation Committee). So, while Levi's book does not explicitly address his anti-fascist activism, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* is anchored in the context of the aspirations of the Italian Resistance and an anti-Fascist future for Italy as well as the author's experiences of war, exile and German occupation in Florence.<sup>134</sup> In a letter to Einaudi, Levi confirms that the experiences of persecution, occupation and Resistance were the 'analogous experiences' that inspired him to convert his impressions of political exile in Lucania into a written narrative ('racconto'):

il *Cristo* [...] fu dapprima esperienza, con pittura e poesia, e teoria e gioia di verità (con *Paura della Libertà*) per diventare infine e apertamente racconto, quando una nuova analoga esperienza, come per un processo di cristallizzazione amorosa, lo rese possibile.<sup>135</sup>

Levi's experience as a political prisoner in internal exile and his critique of the Fascist State in *Cristo* lent him immediate political legitimacy and moral prestige, accounting for the resounding success of the book, which is still one of the most widely read books by any Italian author.<sup>136</sup> The book's publication in 1945 was a flagship event for Einaudi which established

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<sup>133</sup> For details of Levi's politics, see David Bidussa, 'Prefazione' in Carlo Levi, *Scritti politici* (Torino: Einaudi, 2001), pp.v-xxxiv; David Ward, *Antifascisms: Cultural Politics in Italy 1943-1946* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), pp.157-191.

<sup>134</sup> For the evolution of Levi's political after his disillusionment with the Resistance movement, see Philip Cooke, 'Carlo Levi and the Tambroni Affair' in *The Voices of Carlo Levi*, ed. by Joseph Farrell (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), pp.159-174.

<sup>135</sup> Carlo Levi, 'L'autore all'editore' in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (Torino: Einaudi, 2010), pp.xvii-xix, p.xix: '*Cristo* was firstly an experience, with painting and poetry, and a theory and joy in truth (with *Paura della Libertà*); it then finally and openly became a narrative, when a new analogous experience, as though through a process of loving crystallisation, made it possible.'

<sup>136</sup> Levi achieved international celebrity with *Cristo* due to Frances Frenaye's 1947 translation published by Farrar, Strauss & Giroux in 1947. To promote the book, Levi also exposed his paintings at New York's Wildenstein Gallery in June, gaining him a ten-page spread in American lifestyle magazine *Life*. See Carlo Levi, 'Italy's Myth of America', *Life*, 7 July 1947, pp.84-95; Cormac Ó Cuilleannáin, 'Christ Stopped at Eboli: The Fortunes of an American Translation' in Farrell, pp.176-208.

itself as a forum for anti-fascist intellectuals from the publication of *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* onwards. According to Mangoni, its publication was ‘uno dei maggiori risultati editoriali di quegli anni, una delle cifre con cui la casa editrice si ripresentava al suo pubblico alla fine della guerra.’<sup>137</sup> Levi’s status as an oppositional voice who played a major role in the Liberation and re-establishment of Italy after Fascism accounts for much of the early reception of *Cristo* which extols him as a champion of the human rights and humanism in the new anti-Fascist Italy.<sup>138</sup>

The concept of ‘humanism’, defined broadly as ‘any system which accords paramountcy to human interests and possibilities’, acquires a new meaning in the post-war Italian context and has dominated the reception of Carlo Levi’s work since its first publication.<sup>139</sup> For Schoonover, humanism was the dominant rhetoric of neorealist cinema underlining the commonality of human experience and Gordon highlights how the concept of ‘man’ becomes a privileged trope of post-war rhetoric: ‘a code for [authors’] contemplation of war, history and as a veiled figure within this, the genocide.’<sup>140</sup> Thus, Levi’s participation in the Italian post-war discourse of humanism crystallises the anxieties and aspirations of the recent war in *Cristo*, even though the book deals with a period preceding it. Within a year of its publication by Einaudi, the book had sold 40,000 copies confirming Natalia Ginzburg’s prediction: ‘ero colpita dalla bellezza di questa opera, dalla sua umanità ed armonia: credo che il suo successo sarà grandissimo.’<sup>141</sup> Regarding his stay in Lucania, Levi states ‘questo mondo contadino è invece ricchissimo di verità e di potenza umana.’<sup>142</sup> Indeed, Jean-Paul Sartre praises Levi’s ‘amorosa curiosità per tutte le forme umane del vissuto.’<sup>143</sup> Ragghianti emphasises that through Levi’s intellectual and artistic appropriation of Lucania he was able to

<sup>137</sup> Luisa Mangoni, ‘Da *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* all’*Orologio*: Note su Carlo Levi e la casa editrice Einaudi’ in *Carlo Levi: Gli anni fiorentini 1941-194*, ed. by Piero Brunello and Pia Vivarelli (Milan: Donzelli, 2003), p.198: ‘one of the major editorial successes of those years, one of the symbols the publisher used to represent itself to the public at the end of the war.’

<sup>138</sup> See Carlo Muscetta, ‘Leggenda e verità di Carlo Levi’, *Letteratura Militante* (Firenze: Parenti, 1953), pp.94-180; Vittorio Foa, ‘Carlo Levi. Uomo Politico’, *Galleria 17* (1967), pp.203-213.

<sup>139</sup> Gregory Elliot, ‘Humanism’ in *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*, ed. by Michael Payne (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), p.336

<sup>140</sup> Karl Schoonover defines humanism in the context of neorealist cinema as ‘a basic belief that, despite differences, all humans share a common character that unites us’, *Brutal Humanism: The Neorealist Body in Post-war Italian Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), p.xix; Robert S. C. Gordon, 2012), p.114.

<sup>141</sup> Natalia Ginzburg, cited by Luisa Mangoni, ‘Da *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* all’*Orologio*: note su Carlo Levi e la casa editrice Einaudi’ in Brunello and Vivarelli, p.195-211. (196): ‘I was struck by the beauty of this work, by its humanity and harmony: I think it will be enormously successful.’

<sup>142</sup> Carlo Levi, ‘Contadini di Calabria’, *Illustrazione Italiana*, 6 June 1953. Cited by Luigi M. Lombardi Satriani, ‘Parole per il conforto e la dolcezza’ in Carlo Levi, *Conversazioni radiofoniche* (Milan: Donzelli, 2003), p.xvii: ‘This peasant world is actually very rich in truth and human potential.’

<sup>143</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘l’universale singolare’ [1967] in Carlo Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (Torino: Einaudi, 2010), pp.xii-xv(p.xii): ‘A loving curiosity for all human types of experience.’



reveal an essential truth about human life: ‘Levi trovò il ‘suo’ paesaggio in Lucania’ revealing ‘una struttura o scheletro di vita essenziale.’<sup>144</sup> A recent commentator praises Levi’s ‘sensibilità estrema nel cogliere le svariate modalità dell’umano patire e il dolente amore per il mondo’<sup>145</sup> and notes how *Cristo* represented ‘una riflessione sulle forme fondamentali di una condizione umana che aveva investito tutto il mondo, così drammatica e tragica.’<sup>146</sup> As well as highlighting Levi’s text as a vehicle for representing the human condition, another contemporary review draws attention to Levi’s medical training as a means of cross-cultural communication and humanistic reflection: ‘it seems it is largely his work as a doctor that has helped develop compassion and a true understanding of humanity.’<sup>147</sup> A 2014 exhibition of the author’s paintings in Bologna entitled ‘Painting Humanity with Words’ cements the widespread humanistic endorsement of Levi’s intellectual enterprise in Lucania.<sup>148</sup>

How can one square Levi’s account of a world of utmost human exploitation and degradation with the perception of his humanistic mission to guarantee the dignity and integrity of humanity in the face of oppression and squalor? The peasants ‘vivono in un mondo che si continua senza determinazioni, dove l’uomo non si distingue dal suo sole, dalla sua bestia, dalla sua malaria’ (68-69: ‘they live in a world that carries on undeterminedly, where man is not distinguished from his sun, from his beast, from his malaria’); but, according to Levi, ‘in essi è vivo il senso umano di un comune destino, e di una comune accettazione’ (69: ‘a human sense of a common destiny, and of a common acceptance is alive in them’). Human degradation functions paradoxically as a reserve for humanity; a discrepancy detected in Trombadori’s understanding of *Cristo* as ‘l’intreccio tra la storia della miseria con la scoperta di antiche inedite ricchezze e profondità umane.’<sup>149</sup> Lawrence Baldassaro also contrasts humanity, an intrinsically positive ethical value, with the inhumane rationality of the state that oppresses the Lucanians: ‘What he [Levi] found in the peasant civilization of the South was an alternative to the ideologies and practices of the fascist state, an alternative that lent itself to poetic expression. Against what he considered to be the deadening forces of fascist rhetoric and

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<sup>144</sup> Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, *Carlo Levi* (Firenze: Edizioni U, 1948), p.11. ‘Levi found his ‘own’ landscape in Lucania’ revealing a ‘structure or skeleton of essential life.’

<sup>145</sup> Luigi M. Lombardi Satriani, p.xv: ‘extreme sensitivity in gathering the diverse types of human suffering and the pained love for the world.’ / ‘a reflection on the fundamental forms of a human condition which had infused the whole world, so dramatic and tragic.’

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xviii.

<sup>147</sup> Birte Thusselmann, ‘Christ stopped at Eboli’, *British Medical Journal*, 30 June 2010, p.340.

<sup>148</sup> Carlo Levi, ‘L’umanità dipinta con le parole’, CUBE, Bologna, 22 July-11 October 2014.

<sup>149</sup> Antonello Trombadori, ‘L’umanesimo di Carlo Levi’ in *Carlo Levi nella storia e nella cultura italiana*, ed. by Gigliola de Donato (Manduria: Lacaita, 1993), pp.35-38, p.35: ‘the combination of the history of degradation with the discovery of ancient, unregistered human riches and depths.’

idolatry stood the discovery of a world not yet born, a world filled with unrealised potential for humanity.<sup>150</sup> As well as acting as a local doctor, and therefore healing and handling bodies, Levi's activities as a painter cemented his interest in the representation and visualisation of the Lucanians' embodiment, whose radical disempowerment and disenfranchisement is described through a plethora of animal imagery.<sup>151</sup> Paradoxically, the inhabitants of Grassano and Gagliano are described in terms that radically contradict Levi and the critics themselves who laud the peasants' affirmation of humanity in contrast to the ossifying forces of politics. Instead, they are described in animalistic, primitive terms. Faleschini Lerner's illuminating work on Levi's visual poetics argues for Levi's Levinasian humanism based on what she sees as his depiction of a renewed openness to the difference of the Other: 'Levi's writings can be read as the chronicle of his delving into the relational essence of the self, culminating in the experience of perceiving his own self as Other.'<sup>152</sup> However, she does not problematise how this 'other' is presented to the reader, and therefore does not touch on the idiom used by Levi to convey his difference to the peasants and the ways in which their indigence is expressed, echoing Levi's own uncritical mythologization of his peasant subjects. I agree with Faleschini Lerner's detection in *Cristo* of evidence that Levi struggles with the paradox of 'depicting otherness through modes of representation,' but she does not go far enough, because she does not acknowledge the lack of self-reflexivity in Levi's writing, whose representational authority over the peasants entrenches their subjection to the cultured, Western norms which he paradoxically sees them as resisting.<sup>153</sup> I build on her analysis by critiquing the following paradox, namely the ethical and political implications of juxtaposing the absolute dehumanisation of poverty and exclusion with a privileged insight into a common human experience in Levi's work.

In my view, the peasants' animalisation in *Cristo* has a dual and contradictory function: firstly, to show the dehumanising impact of Fascism; secondly and conversely, to dehistoricise the peasants' condition due to their primitive nature, uncontaminated by the corruption of the Northern civilisation which they do not understand. In this light, their hybridity with the animal life forms which surround them is given a redemptive innocence that stems from being 'outside

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<sup>150</sup> Lawrence Baldassaro, 'Paura della libertà: Carlo Levi's unfinished preface', *Italica* 72:2 (Summer 1995), pp.143-154, p.151. Emphasis mine.

<sup>151</sup> Carlo Levi's *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* originated from a series of about seventy paintings depicting the environment and people of the village of Aliano (Grassano and Gagliano in the text) created during the author's internment in Lucania until May 1936.

<sup>152</sup> Giovanna Faleschini Lerner, *Carlo Levi's Visual Poetics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p.12.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.* p.34.

of history'. His depiction of the animalised human being problematises the possibility of political participation, the suffocating impact of the totalitarian state and the hope for political renewal in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*.

### **Animalised bodies in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli***

In *Cristo*, the Lucanians are depicted as being animal-like in two ways; firstly, through an extensive use of simile, Levi underlines that the peasants have physical traits that make them look like animals. Secondly, Levi's semantic choices depict the Lucanians as hybrid which casts further doubt on their humanity. Levi's representation of the peasants emphasises their degradation, but also entrenches his cultural superiority achieved by defamiliarising his subjects and appropriating them through the lens of the cultured visual and literary artist. Furthermore, by juxtaposing their animal-like passivity with their degradation he not only testifies to their oppression by a political regime that cements their disenfranchisement, but runs the risk of justifying it, by casting doubt on the viability of the possibility of their ever becoming political subjects.

Firstly, Levi's use of simile with comparative adverbs and verbs ('assomigliare', 'parere') implicates the reader in his representational strategy by recalling familiar images. I am not assuming any qualitative superiority of human over animal in my analysis but rather I see the author's own vocabulary as discriminating against animals and underlining their negative traits such as incomprehensibility, irrationality and uncleanness. For instance, the peasants are closed and animal-like: 'i loro visi sono terrei, chiusi e animaleschi' (147: 'their faces are earthy, closed, and animal-like'); Levi notes their unpleasant similarity to a herd: 'stavano immobile nel sole, come un gregge alla pastura; e di un gregge avevano l'odore' (43: 'they were standing still in the sun, like a herd out to pasture, and they smelled like a herd too'). The women's chatter, compounded by a dialect that the narrator does not understand, is compared to birdsong ('parlavano tutte insieme, come uccelli'/'they were all talking together, like birds', 28). The women's fearful suspicion of the newcomer causes them to scatter, like wild animals: 'i loro occhi neri si voltavano rapidi e curiosi dalla mia parte, e subito fuggivano, come animali del bosco' (28: 'their black eyes turned rapidly and curiously to where I was standing, and escape me straightaway, like woodland animals'). Veiled and secretive, these women stare at Levi with 'una selvatica gravità' ('a savage gravity') to the extent that they do not fit into the narrator's conceptual categories: 'non mi parevano donne, ma soldati di uno strano esercito, o

piuttosto una flotilla di barche tondeggianti e oscure' (28: 'they did not look like women, but like soldiers of a strange army, or rather a flotilla of round, dark boats'). Later, veiled women are likened to butterflies ('assomigliavano strane farfalle', 'quelle due farfalle bianche e nere', 189). One man has a face 'like a beech marten' ('sottile come quello di una faina', 41); two girls jump around like 'due nere cavallette' (187, 'two little black horses'). Faleschini Lerner describes this technique as 'ekphrastic' in that Levi borrows visual elements to intensify the pictorial quality of his text whereby '*ekphrasis* links the image to nature and the word to culture.'<sup>154</sup> Yet, I disagree with her analysis of *ekphrasis* as an empowering representational strategy in Levi's visual poetics that enables the peasant to gain access to the realm of culture<sup>155</sup>, because the political and ethical connotations of blurring the existential condition of the Lucanians with that of the animal does anything but emancipate them, as the narrator is speaking to a cultured observer in the language of the Western intellectual marked by the rationalising signposting of simile and comparison. In Derrida's view, the act of naming someone as animal is to assert superiority and control: 'the animal is a word, it is an appellation that men have instituted, a name that they give themselves the right and the authority to give to the living other.'<sup>156</sup> Levi's text serves to augment his authority as author and artist, but also to further his own political agenda. As we will see, the terms of Levi's description actually foreclose his hopes of political regeneration in opposition to Fascism due to the passivisation of the Lucanians through their identification with animals; the narrator's self-confessed gendered violence against the irrationality and superstition of the peasant civilisation also aligns him with the oppressive politics he criticises.

Gradually, the text abandons this signposting and naturalises the confluence of animal and human in Lucania, essentialising the peasants' animal-like traits – a symptom of their oppression as well as a symbol of their political immaturity. With the abandonment of the signposting of simile in several episodes, Levi's narrator creates a slippage between man and animal that undermines their humanity and embeds them in the superstition and primitivity that causes them to be oppressed by the landowners, who refer to them as 'buona gente ma primitiva' (13: 'good people but primitive'). For the narrator, the human is not an adequate explanatory paradigm to describe living conditions in Lucania nor does it account for the non-

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<sup>154</sup> Faleschini Lerner, p.24.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25.

<sup>156</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Animal that Therefore I am*, tr. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p.23. In a 2002 translation, Wills translated Derrida's 'l'autre vivant' as 'another living creature'. See *Critical Inquiry* 28 :2 (2002), 369-418, p.392.

anthropocentric world view of the *contadini* populated by ‘molti esseri strani, che partecipavano di una doppia natura [...] la donna-vacca, l’uomo-lupo, ogni albero, ogni oggetto partecipava di quell’ambiguità’ (191: ‘many strange beings, which participate in a double nature [...] the woman-cow, the man-wolf, every tree, every object participated in the ambiguity’). The peasants identify themselves with their natural environment and confuse the boundaries between themselves and the world, believing that every living being has a dual animal-human nature. Hybridity characterises every being in Grassano and Gagliano; the children ‘avevano qualcosa dell’animale e qualcosa dell’uomo adulto’ (190: ‘had something of the animal and something of the adult man’); every peasant has ‘un’eredità animalesca’ (99: ‘an animal inheritance’). For Lucile Desblache, the rediscovery of mankind as *more* animal than man is a redemptive project to counter the dehumanising tendencies of modernity:

This animal in opposition to which man had found his identity is now linked to the phenomenon of dehumanisation endemic to contemporary existence. As a literary persona, the animal is no longer symbol of an animality to be overcome, but rather an integral part of the human to be retrieved, agent of a difference that ought to be respected or rediscovered.<sup>157</sup>

While this may chime with the humanistic reception of Levi’s narrative work, *Cristo* does not portray the retrieval of animality to be desirable as the narrator operates qualitative distinctions between the filthy, sick and pastoral animals of the South and his own dog, who is not a working animal but a companion whose superior status is signalled by his name ‘Barone’. Barone’s double is a lion in the peasants’ eye, placing him above the bovine or savage hybrids of the peasants, ‘per loro era un animale eraldico’ (100: ‘for them he was a heraldic animal’) and this duplicity is assigned to his owner as well: ‘pare che [...] abbiano scoperto che anche in me è una doppia natura, e che anch’io sono mezzo barone e mezzo leone’ (100: ‘it appears that they also discovered a double nature in me, and that I am also half baron, half lion’). Unlike the cow or the goat who symbolise passive stupidity in the face of survival, the lion has connotations of bravery, power and justice, symbolising Christian righteousness, and the Tribe of Judah in the Old Testament.<sup>158</sup> By referring to Barone and Levi as hybrids of a ‘heraldic’ nature by associating them with lions, the peasants associate the narrator and his dog with an aristocratic, quasi-religious superiority in stark contrast to the mode of hybridity occupied by the peasants, for which the omnipresence of the image of the goat is significant. When the

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<sup>157</sup> Lucile Desblache, ‘L’autre sauvage et familier’ in *Le Livre de l’Hospitalité – Accueil de l’étranger dans l’histoire des cultures*, ed. by Alain Montardon (Paris : Bayard, 2004), pp.1738-1768 (p.1742). My translation.

<sup>158</sup> See J.C. Ciriot, *Dictionary of Symbols* (London: Routledge, 1962), pp.189-190.

narrator witnesses how a cripple inflates a goat's skin to make tankards, he remarks on the transfusion of essences between the man and the animal. The cripple blows on the animal's belt causing the two creatures to morph into one:

a vederlo così attaccato all'animale, che andava a mano a mano mutando e crescendo, mentre l'uomo, senza mutare contegno, pareva assottigliarsi e svuotarsi di tutto il suo fiato, sembrava di assistere a una strana metamorfosi, dove l'uomo si versasse, a poco a poco nella bestia (41).<sup>159</sup>

It is significant that the first instance of hybridity in the text is that of the transfusion of essences between man and goat. The image of goats recurs throughout the text: goats are companions of the village children, who even look like them as they are 'immersi in quel fuggente misterioso mondo animale nel quale vivevano, come piccole capre svelte e fugaci' (188: 'immersed in this strange, transient, mysterious animal world in which they live, like slim fleeting little goats'). Goats are also the sign of the economic pressure the peasants are subjected to by the fiscal system endorsed by the fascist government and executed by the omnipresent 'U.E.' ('Ufficio Esattoriale', 29, 115). The cripple makes tankards out of goat skin because the peasants cannot pay the livestock on their animals: 'I contadini amazzano tutte le capre. Per forza. La tassa chi può pagarla?' (41: 'the peasants are killing all the goats. They have to. Who can pay the tax?'). After the operation, the skinned goat lies naked 'come un santo, rimase sola sul tavolaccio a guardare il cielo' (41) and thus acquires sacrificial connotations implying the sovereignty of political structures over the lives of the Lucanians. The goat becomes an emblem of the dual problem the peasant condition in Lucania presents: immersed in superstition and irrationality, their world is 'negato alla Storia' (3), and yet the recurrence of the goat image, introduced as a sacrificial animal in the episode of the cripple, describes the oppression and abandonment of the peasants to a violent and degrading historical destiny ('Il caprone e l'agnello ripercorrono, ogni giorno, le note strade'/'the goat and the lamb retrace, every day, the familiar streets', 98). Sacrificed to the economic and political oppression of the alienating fascist state represented by the U.E. tax collectors and the decadent bourgeois fascists of Grassano (a village whose inhabitants are described by the secretary of the local 'fascio' as 'tutti buoni e fascisti', 48) the ubiquitous goat is an analogy of the crushing impact of the State on the Lucanians. Levi theorises the exclusionary violence of the state, and particularly

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<sup>159</sup> 'to see him attached to the animal like that, which slowly changed and grew as the man, without changing his demeanour, seemed to become thinner and empty himself of all his breath, he seemed to be partaking in a strange metamorphosis whereby the man was pouring himself, little by little, into the beast.'

the Fascist state (depicted as ‘la selva cittadina di Roma e nella selva nera di Germania’) on the individual in *Paura della libertà*.<sup>160</sup>

In his first book, *Paura della Libertà*, written in France in 1939, ‘the unfinished preface’ to Levi’s *oeuvre*, the author expounds on the causes of the deep crisis of Western civilization on the eve of the Second World War by proposing a ‘teoria del nazismo, anche se il nazismo non è una volta chiamato per nome.’<sup>161</sup> The ‘fear of freedom’ is the root of modernity’s turmoil which he links back to a fundamental fear of what he calls ‘the sacred’, a chaotic dedifferentiation of essences from which the individual must emerge. The displacement of the sacred onto this-worldly *idols* displaces the task of self-liberation and its principle form is the State in Levi’s view: ‘lo Stato-idolo è dunque il segno insieme del bisogno di rapporti umani veri, e della incapacità a istituirla liberamente.’<sup>162</sup> The state survives at the expense of the individual and his agency: ‘Lo stato [...] non può vivere che di sacrifici umani.’<sup>163</sup> The result is an alienating mystification of power: ‘il processo del sacrificio è adunque tutt’uno col processo religioso – ed è un atto di alienazione. [...] il sacrificio necessario è la rinuncia dell’autonomia, e una serie di divieti e di rispetti, e il senso della giusta inaccessibilità delle funzioni statali.’<sup>164</sup> For Levi, the state survives at the expense of a marginalised group which have been expelled, sacrificed as a token of its all-powerfulness and inhumanity: ‘sul piano sociale, il sacrificio necessario sarà una mutilazione di una parte della società. Un gruppo, una classe, una nazione dovranno forzatamente essere espulsi, essere considerati nemici, diventare stranieri per poter esser testimoni del dio [lo Stato-idolo, AH], e vittime’ (36-7).<sup>165</sup> For instance, when Levi is forbidden from healing a sick man, the villagers express their outrage by exclaiming ‘quelli di Roma preferiscono che noi si resti come bestie’ (214: ‘the people in Rome would rather we remained like beasts’). The Lucanians are stigmatised by the feudal landowners, representatives of the state, as anathema to the progress of the Italian nation and

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<sup>160</sup> Carlo Levi, ‘Paura della libertà’ in *Scritti politici* (Torino: Einaudi, 2001), pp.132-209, p.168: ‘The urban jungle of Rome, and the black forest of Germany’

<sup>161</sup> Lawrence Baldassaro, ‘Paura della Libertà: Levi’s Unfinished Preface’, *Italica* 72:2 (Summer 1995), pp.143-154, p.146; Carlo Levi, ‘Prefazione a “Paura della libertà”’ in *Scritti politici*, pp.210-225, p.219: ‘a theory of Nazism, even though Nazism is not once mentioned by name.’

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p.141: ‘the State-idol is therefore the sign for both the need to real human relations and the impossibility of instituting them freely.’

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p.141: ‘the state can only live from human sacrifices.’

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, p.141: ‘the process of sacrifice is the same as that of religion – it is an act of alienation.’; 143: ‘the necessary sacrifice is the renunciation of autonomy, and a series of interdictions and respects, and the sense of the rightful inaccessibility of state functions.’

<sup>165</sup> <sup>165</sup> ‘at the level of society, the necessary sacrifice will be a mutilation of one part of society. A group, a class, a nation, will have to be forcibly expelled, regarded as enemies, become strangers to be witnesses to the god, and victims.’

therefore abandoned to their primitive degradation.<sup>166</sup> In Girard's ground-breaking work *Violence and the Sacred*, he theorises that the sacrificial victim is scapegoated for the sake of the community's cohesion, by deflecting the violence that otherwise would have erupted in its midst. The sacrificial scapegoat must be 'neither outside nor inside the community, but marginal to it: children, slaves, livestock.'<sup>167</sup> Sacrifice is accomplished in the name of the consensus and cohesion of the community in Girard's view.<sup>168</sup> In this respect, it could be argued that by presenting the animalised Lucanians as sacrificial and himself in an aristocratic-heraldic light, Levi actually condones the sacrifice of the peasant population as in their marginality, they represent the authority of the enlightened, educated standards of citizenship and professional integrity he represents.

### **The creaturely drama of the Lucanians**

In my view the peasants' identification with animals not only conveys their disenfranchisement, but also naturalises their economic and political condition, given Levi's own identification with aristocratic, powerful animals and his narrative control over the peasants through his use of simile and metaphor. Insofar as the peasants of Lucania are not fully identified as human in *Cristo* due to their poor living conditions and oppression by the alienating policies of the state, they can be described as creaturely, a concept signifying a dehumanising exposure to state power and institutionalised violence. In his 2006 work *On Creaturely Life* Santner theorises creatureliness as a 'specifically human way of finding oneself caught in the midst of antagonisms in and of the political field.'<sup>169</sup> It is a mode of exposure particular to the human being that embodies his vulnerability to political power; in this sense, Santner defines 'creatureliness' as 'a biopolitical animation that distinguishes the human from the animal,' following Michel Foucault's pioneering concept of man's biopolitical entrapment within systems of political power and administration.<sup>170</sup> In this sense the peasants are biopolitically exposed to the whims of political administration: 'per gli imperscrutabili voleri di una Storia che non gli riguardava, i contadini di Melfi caddero, per tutti i secoli che seguirono

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<sup>166</sup> The previous quotations bears parallels with the fate of Europe's Jews under Nazism, and it is worth noting Levi was from a Jewish family and associated with other Jewish-Italian intellectuals such as Leone Ginzburg and Vittorio Foa, but never identified himself as Jewish, so fully was he assimilated to the Turinese left-wing intelligentsia. *Paura della libertà* is the only book in which Levi engages with Judaism by describing Jews as an enslaved people of the Christian God. See pp.157-160.

<sup>167</sup> René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, tr. Patrick Gregory (London: Athlone Press, 1995), p.95.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

<sup>169</sup> Santner, 2006, p.xix.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.* p.39.



nella più nera miseria' (120).<sup>171</sup> The Lucanian's creatureliness, expressed as a slippage of human into animal modes of embodiment, is a direct result of their being affected by and unable to intervene in the Fascist political system which epitomises their millennial downtroddenness: 'Gli Stati, le Teocrazie, gli Eserciti organizzati sono naturalmente più forti del popolo sparso dei contadini: questi devono perciò rassegnarsi ad essere dominati' (120).<sup>172</sup> Creatureliness, as Santner theorises it, is anathema to human agency as it reveals the disruption of individual consciousness, or how 'the life of the "ego" has been disorganised,' through traumatic biopolitical exposure.<sup>173</sup>

However, in stark contrast to Levi's own claims that his period in Lucania was removed from the machinations of contemporary politics, Derobertis' archival research places Lucania in the thick of Italian colonial and political debates at the height of fascism's popularity.<sup>174</sup> Derobertis also outlines the ways in which the peasants are caught 'in the battlefield of fascist political reforms' by 'a political power that had violently imposed itself' through an aggressive 'ruralism' (*ruralismo*) inherent to the *strapaese* movement defined by Piero Bevilacqua as 'a social life rooted in the land, grounded in the false immobility of a rural life that was founded on work and simple domestic joys.'<sup>175</sup> Thus, a 'sound distance from political and trade union struggle' could be established for the 'subaltern classes.'<sup>176</sup> In addition to Derobertis' argument, I understand Levi's creaturely depiction of the Lucanians as a privileging of their exclusion from history (understood to be violent and destructive), as well as a naturalisation of their passivity, which essentialises their disenfranchisement.

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<sup>171</sup> 'due to the unscrutable whims of a History that did not concern them, the peasants of Melfi fell, for every century that was to follow, into the blackest misery.'

<sup>172</sup> 'The States, the Theocracies, the organised Armies are naturally stronger than the sparse population of peasants: these must therefore resign themselves to being dominated.'

<sup>173</sup> Santner, *op.cit.*, p.xiii.

<sup>174</sup> Levi declares his own similar feeling of entrapment by history in a letter to Einaudi: 'Era forse anch'esso un altro, un giovane ignoto e ancora da farsi, che il caso e il tempo avevano spinto laggiù, sotto quei gialli occhi animali, quei neri occhi di donne, di uomini, di fanciulli ... perché si trovasse nell'altrove, nell'altro da sé, perché scoprisse la storia fuori della storia, e il tempo fuori del tempo e il dolore prima delle cose, e se stesso, fuori dello specchio dell'acque di Narciso, negli uomini, sulla terra arida.' Carlo Levi, 'Lettera a Giulio Einaudi', p.xii. ('He too was perhaps another, an ignorant youth yet to make his way in the world, that fate and time had sent down there, below those yellow animal eyes, those black women's, men's, children's eyes... so that he could find himself in this other place, in what was outside of him, so that he could discover the history outside of history, the time outside of time and the pain that predates all things, and himself, outside the mirror of Narcissus' mirror, among men, upon the arid earth.')

<sup>175</sup> Piero Bevilacqua cited by Roberto Derobertis, 'Southerners, Migrants, Colonised: a Postcolonial perspective on Carlo Levi's *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* and Southern Italy today' in *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, ed. by Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp.157-175( p.163).

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

Portrayed as having no active political or historical consciousness of themselves or their political position in Italy on the eve of the Second World War, the peasants' condition is filtered through the historical lens of the narrator's reflections:

pensavo che si dovrebbe scrivere una storia di questa Italia, se è possibile scrivere una storia di quello che non si svolge nel tempo: la sola storia di quello che è eterno e immutabile, una mitologia. Questa Italia si è svolta nel suo nero silenzio, come la terra, in un susseguirsi di stagioni uguali e di uguali sventure, e quello che è di esterno è passato su di lei, non ha lasciato traccia, e non conta. (123)<sup>177</sup>

Entrapped in a cyclical, selfsame world they are incapable of intervening in, the Lucanians reflect the condition of animals in Heidegger's discussion, whereby the animal is 'poor in world' [*weltarm*], in contrast to man who is 'world-forming' [*weltbildend*].<sup>178</sup> Indeed, they are 'pagani, non cittadini: gli dei dello Stato e della città non possono aver culto fra queste argille, dove regna il lupo e l'antico ... né alcun muro separa il mondo degli uomini da quello degli animali' (68).<sup>179</sup> Organised statehood only alienates the peasant population, from the Trojan wars that subjected the ancient Italians ('gli antichi italiani') 'che vivevano nei campi con gli animali' (123: 'they lived in the fields with their animals') to Aeneas' campaign in which 'l'Italia fu assoggettata, quell'umile Italia / per cui morì la vergine Cammilla / Eurialo e Turno e Niso di ferute' (123).<sup>180</sup> Their revolts are not even politically motivated, but stem from 'the black lake of the heart': 'questo desiderio cieco di distruzione, questa volontà di annichilimento, sanguinosa e suicida, cova per secoli la mite pazienza della fatica quotidiana' (125: 'this blind desire for destruction, this will to annihilate, bloody and suicidal, broods the meek patience of daily toil for centuries'). In Levi's view, the peasants' history can be represented as a cycle of eruptive violence, stemming from their instinctual animality rather than any desire for logical organisation. The ahistoricity of the peasant condition and Levi's poetic descriptions of their condition confirm the narrator's self-belief in his 'world-forming'

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<sup>177</sup> 'I thought that a history of this Italia should be written, if it is possible to write a history of that which does not happen in time: the only history of that which is eternal and immutable, a mythology. This Italy has occurred in its black silence, like the earth, in a succession of the same seasons and the same misfortunes, and that which is external has passed over her, without a trace, and does not count.'

<sup>178</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2004), p.388. See also Giorgio Agamben's discussion in *The Open: Man and Animal*, tr. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p.51.

<sup>179</sup> 'pagans, not citizens: the gods of the State and the city can not be worshipped among these clay hills, where the wolf and archaic rule [...] nor does any wall separate the world of humans and the world of animals.'

<sup>180</sup> Levi quotes Dante's own citation of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Emphasis mine. See *Inferno* I, l.106-108: 'Di quella umile Italia fia salute/ per cui morì la vergine Cammilla,/ Eurialo e Turno e Niso di ferute.'

qualities via his exercise of historical consciousness affiliating him to the political and historical establishments that contribute to the peasants' situation.<sup>181</sup>

Patience, pain and resignation characterise the Lucanians' existence:

questa fraternità passiva, questo patire insieme, questa rassegnata, solidale, secolare pazienza è il profondo sentimento comune dei contadini, legame non religioso, ma naturale. Essi non hanno, né possono avere, quella che si usa chiamare coscienza politica (45)<sup>182</sup>

Thus, I take issue with Baldassaro's assessment of the Lucanians as 'the image of the individual who has not yet been suffocated by History and the state represents the symbol of opposition to the rigid authority of the regime as well as hope of rebirth in the midst of what is, for Levi, the spent energy of European rationalism.'<sup>183</sup> Their lives are marked by a total passivity and lack of individuality, characterised by a common suffering, of which their hybrid descriptions as animal is a symptom.

The end of *Cristo* takes a more political turn when Levi diagnoses the stultification of Italians' political emancipation due to the privileging of the State versus the individual:

'fra lo statalismo fascista, lo statalismo liberale, lo statalismo socialista e tutte quelle altre forme di statalismo che in un paese piccolo-borghese come il nostro cercheranno di sorgere, e l'antistatalismo dei contadini, c'è e ci sarà sempre un abisso' (220).<sup>184</sup>

Fascism, according to Levi, is the zenith of this political imbalance and he ends the book on the pessimistic note that all future forms of government will reflect the 'eternal Italian Fascism' that is the inhumane power of the state: 'ricreeranno uno Stato altrettanto, e forse più, lontano dalla vita, idolatrico e astratto, perpetueranno e peggioreranno, sotto nuovi nomi e nuove bandiere, l'eterno fascismo italiano. Con lui lo statalismo piccolo-borghese è arrivato

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<sup>181</sup>I use Hans-Georg Gadamer's definition here: 'a reflexive position concerning all that is handed down by tradition. Historical consciousness no longer listens sanctimoniously to the voice that reaches out from the past, but in reflection on it, replaces it within the context where it took root in order to see the significance and relative value proper to it': 'The Problem of Historical Consciousness' in *Interpretive Social Science: A Second Look*, ed. by Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp.103-163, p.111.

<sup>182</sup> 'this passive fraternity, this suffering together, this resigned, solidary, century-long patience is the deep common sentiment of the peasants, not a religious, but a natural bond. They do not have, nor can they have, that which is usually called political consciousness.'

<sup>183</sup> Baldassaro, p.151.

<sup>184</sup> 'Between fascist statism, liberal statism, socialist statism and all the other forms of statism which in a petit-bourgeois state like ours try to emerge, and the anti-statism of the peasants, there is and always will be an abyss

alla più complete affermazione' (222).<sup>185</sup> The subjection of the individual to the state is a necessary relation in *Cristo* which essentialises and generalises the creaturely drama of the Lucanians as 'the Lucania in each of us', that is, a symbol of every Italian's political existence based on suffering, meekness and creatureliness.<sup>186</sup>

Thus, the depiction of the creatureliness of the inhabitants of Lucania mobilises a general definition of the Italian character, where the Lucania in each of us symbolises the creaturely, passive, suffering and downtroddenness of the Italian national character which the Italian press repeated to gain favour from the Allies and avoid a harsh peace treaty at the end of the Second World War. General Zanussi, an active participant in Mussolini's Second Army occupation of Yugoslavia, in his exculpatory memoir stated that the Italian 'by nature was more inclined to let himself be killed than to kill [...] no one will persuade our peasant, our artisan and our worker to change his ways or his mindset, lower himself or worse, take delight in crime, strip himself of that natural sense of benevolence that is inborn in him that is indicative of a civilization a thousand years old.'<sup>187</sup> Emphasising the ethical value of the simplicity of Italians, a people of workers and artisans, 'the salt of the earth', Zanussi's depiction of Italians' unshakeable, millennial sense of humanity echoes with Levi's passivising view of the Lucanians.

### **The gendered violence of the creator**

Levi's creaturely depiction of the Lucanians reveals much about his Western (or Northern) educated political persona which is also a gendered one, whose masculine authority is upheld through physical violence. In an emblematic episode of the book, Levi's narrator troubles the supposedly innocuous and humanitarian gaze of the doctor-narrator-painter by physically overpowering his housekeeper to maintain physical, artistic and intellectual authority over her. In this sense, one can understand the creatures of Lucania as being in a relationship of subjection to their creator, Levi.

Levi wants to create a visual archive of the inhabitants of Gagliano: 'dipingevo molte nature morte, e facevo spesso posare i ragazzini' (135: 'I painted many 'still life' paintings and I often had the children pose for me'). Still life and children's portraiture are both means of

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<sup>185</sup> 'They will recreate the same kind of state, maybe more of a state, idolatrous and abstract, they will perpetuate and worsen, with new names and under new banners, the eternal Italian fascism. With it, the petit-bourgeois statism has arrived at its most complete affirmation.'

<sup>186</sup> Carlo Levi, 'L'autore all'editore', p. xviii.

<sup>187</sup> Zanussi, *Guerra e catastrofe in Italia* (Roma, Corso, 1945), cited by Focardi and Klinkhammer, p.339.

controlling the artists' environment by arranging it (in the case of the children, underlined using the passivizing 'facevo posare') according to the painters' aesthetic vision. However, he is unable to depict the life of adult peasants due to incomprehensible and unexpected obstacles in the attitude of the women and the absence of the men: 'avrei voluto dipingere anche i ritratti dei contadini: ma gli uomini avevano da fare nei campi, e le donne se ne schermivano, per quanto lusingate dalle mie richieste' (135: 'I would have wanted to also paint portraits of the peasants: but the men had to work the fields, and the women shied away, no matter how flattered they were by my requests'). As we will see the creative act requires subjection of nature, women and children to assert the authority and authorship of the male subject over the subaltern and as such evokes not only anthropological and ethnographic discourse, but also the sensualist decadence of 19<sup>th</sup> century poetry.

In his desire to paint Giulia, known as 'la Santarcangelese', Levi feels entitled as a male, educated subject to exert violence on a feminine, animalised human being for the sake of artistic representation. He asks Giulia to pose for him, appreciating that their relationship is already a vertical one of subject and master: 'La Giulia mi considerava il suo padrone, e non avrebbe detto di no a nessuna mia domanda' (135: 'Giulia regarded me as her master, and she would never have refused any of my requests'). Disregarding the peasants' belief that likenesses violate the physical or spiritual integrity of the living thing ('un ritratto sottrae qualcosa alla persona ritratata, un'immagine: e, per questa sottrazione, il pittore acquista un potere assoluto su chi ha posato per lui' / 'a portrait subtracts something from the person represented, an image: and due to this subtraction, the painter acquires an absolute power over his subject', 136) as a magical superstition, Levi tries to persuade Giulia to overcome her irrationality but Giulia refuses. The narrator had previously been shocked by the women's autonomy in Lucania manifesting itself in the matriarchal structure of Gagliano and Grasso's societies (due to absent migrant fathers: 'l'autorità delle madri è sovrana [...] il regime è matriarcale' / 'the authority of the mothers is supreme [...] the regime is matriarchal', 89) and their liberal attitude to sex ('Le donne, chiuse nei veli, sono come animali selvatici. Non pensano che all'amore fisico, con estrema naturalezza, e ne parlano con una libertà e semplicità di linguaggio che stupisce', 89).<sup>188</sup> Thus, in an attempt reestablish his authority, he overpowers her:

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<sup>188</sup> 'the women, sealed in their veils, are like wild animals. They only think of physical love, with extreme nonchalance, and they speak about it in astoundingly simple and free way'. Levi also naturalises some values

Io capii anche che, per vincere questo suo timore magico, avrei dovuto adoperare una magia più forte della paura; e questa non poteva essere che una potenza diretta e superiore, la violenza. La minacciai dunque di batterla, e ne feci l'atto, e forse anche qualcosa di più dell'atto. (137)<sup>189</sup>

The shockingly ambiguous phrase 'anche qualcosa più dell'atto' amplifies the violence to which he subjects Giulia, highlighting Levi's elevation of the male creative desire above the physical integrity of (female) subjects, whose bodies he can violate in order to create idealised images of passive, apolitical and marginalised humanity. The result of this violent encounter is Giulia's complete submission and animalisation, further confirming Levi's alignment of animality with passivity and victimhood:

Appena vide e sentí le mie mani alzate, il viso della Giulia si coprì di uno sfavillio di beatitudine e si aperse ad un sorriso felice a mostrare i suoi denti di lupo. Come prevedevo, nulla era più desiderabile per lei che di essere dominata da una forza assoluta. Divenuta ad un tratto docile come un agnello, la Giulia posò con pazienza, e di fronte agli argomenti indiscutibili della potenza, dimenticò i ben giustificati e naturali timori. (137)<sup>190</sup>

Subduing Giulia – who belongs to the realm of nature and irrationality – into his cultural worldview, Levi sees his act of creation as an act of salvific redemption from her savage nature. Contemporary critics have not considered the violence of this episode, prioritising Levi's artistic prerogative and intellectualising his use of power as a reflection of the primitive relations in the region. For instance, Bazzocchi states 'si tratta di salvare la composizione pittorica che rimanda alla completezza del mondo cioè dell'individuo inserito un sistema di rapport vitali.'<sup>191</sup> Faleschini Lehrer states that it encapsulates the irresolvable problem at the heart of Levi's art, namely how the Northern intellectual can do justice to a reality that he perceives from the outside but feels the imperative to depict for the sake of its future participation in the historical process:

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such as 'honour' as masculine, for instance, 'in paese [...] il sentimento dell'onore si disgiunge da quello di paternità' / 'the feeling of honour is detached from that of paternity' (89).

<sup>189</sup> 'I understood that to overcome this magic superstition of hers, I would need to adopt a stronger magic than fear; this could not be anything but a direct and superior force – violence. I threatened to beat her, and I did, and maybe a little more than that.'

<sup>190</sup> 'As soon as she saw and felt my hands, Giulia's face flushed with happiness and opened up into a happy smile that showed her wolf's teeth. As I predicted, nothing was more desirable to her than to be dominated by an absolute force. Suddenly meek as a lamb, Giulia posed patiently, and faced with the irrefutable arguments of power, she forgot her justified and natural fears.'

<sup>191</sup> Marco Antonio Bazzocchi, *L'Italia vista dalla luna: un paese in divenire tra letteratura e cinema* (Torino: Pearson, 2012), p.53: 'it is about saving the pictural composition that harks back to the completeness of the world, that is of the individual inserted in to a system of vital relations.'

By depicting [the peasants] in words and images, Levi gives recognition to their civilisation and empowers them as actors in the historical process from which they have traditionally been excluded. At the same time, he necessarily imposes upon them a form, fixes the flux of their experience in an image of his own making and thus exercises a type of authority over their lives.<sup>192</sup>

This assessment rightly outlines the paradox at the heart of Levi's project: he depicts a disenfranchised faction of political society, but cannot do so without imposing his own intellectual baggage. However, Lerner's account does not go far enough in recognising that the violence Levi depicts in the scene is real so the episode evinces more deeply rooted contradictions than those highlighted, because it is difficult to see how the ensuing portrait (and indeed the animalised depictions I have discussed prior to this) empowers Giulia to become an actor of the historical process. The critic argues that 'for Levi the civilisation of southern peasantry, with its resistance to the categories of modernity, history and the state, and binary logic, becomes a critical intellectual position from which to observe the hegemonic Northwest axis and assert the necessity of preserving difference in the face of authoritarian models of modernity.'<sup>193</sup> Yet Levi's creatures are at the mercy of a creator who exercises physical, discursive and representational authority over them by naturalising his master-slave relationship to the peasants ('Mi supponeva un grande potere, ed era contenta di questo, nella sua passività' / 'she believed me to be very powerful, and was content with this in her passivity', 94). The resulting painting emphasises Giulia's 'viso giallo di serpente' ('yellow snake's face', 138), linking women with original sin, and a visceral, animalistic motherhood: 'un modo di essere materno, dove non traspare nessun sentimentalismo [...]: un attaccamento fisico e terrestre, una compassione amara e rassegnata' (138).<sup>194</sup> Her archaic features do not recall Greek or Roman civilisation (the foundations of Western humanism) but hark back to a preternatural prehistory: 'questo viso aveva un fortissimo carattere archaico, non nel senso del classico greco, né del romano, ma di un'antichità più misteriosa e crudele [...] senza rapporti e mistioni con gli uomini, ma legata alla zolla e alle eterne divinità animali' (92).<sup>195</sup> By excluding her from the Western cultural frameworks of the individual and human being by depicting her as 'solemn and barbaric' ('barbara e solenne'), full of primitive drives ('spirante una forza animalesca',

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<sup>192</sup> Giovanna Faleschini Lerner, *Carlo Levi's Visual Poetics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p.xviii.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p.49.

<sup>194</sup> 'a maternal mode of being, that allows no sentimentalism to transpire, a physical and earthy attachment, a bitter and resigned compassion.'

<sup>195</sup> 'this face had a strong archaic character, not in the classic Greek or Roman sense, but harked instead to a more mysterious and cruel antiquity [...] without interaction or relations with human, but linked to the earth and to the eternal animal divinities.'

91; 'era, come le bestie, uno spirito della terra', 93), Levi justifies his use of violence against her.<sup>196</sup>

This episode causes me to disagree with Lerner's imposition of a Levinasian framework on Levi's work where she identifies an 'art born from the loving recognition of the other's presence.'<sup>197</sup> For Levinas, the other represents the 'fundamental ontological law [...] to care about the stranger, the widow, the orphan, a preoccupation for the other man.'<sup>198</sup> But as this episode shows Levi's much lauded 'humanism' is a gendered concern for the expressive freedoms of 'mankind' at the expense of women, animals, and the subaltern. Hence, by seeing Giulia through an animalised lens, he further entrenches her otherness, which can be enjoyed as an aesthetic object, aligning Levi with the decadent sensualism of the sexual *flâneur* in Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal*, if we compare the treatment of Giulia to the female object of poetic sensuality in 'Le Serpent qui danse': 'sous le fardeau de ta paresse / ta tête d'enfant / se balance avec la mollesse d'un jeune elephant.'<sup>199</sup> Levi's treatment of his own sister, who visits him from Turin mid-way through his exile, underscores his bias towards the civilised, humanistic rationalism of the North. There is a clear gradation of femininity at work in *Cristo* where Luisa, the narrator's educated, graceful, compassionate and intelligent sister is aligned with his own self-identification as a hegemonic, individual subject; he gushes that 'aveva portato con sé la sua naturale atmosfera razionale e cittadina'(79: 'she had brought with her natural rational and civic feeling') as opposed to Giulia: 'fredda, impassibile e animalesca, la strega Contadina era una serva fedele' (94: 'cold, impassive and animal-like, the peasant witch was a faithful servant'). Far from what one critic has called la 'fiducia istintiva' (instinctive trust) placed by the peasants in his medical and artistic prowess and the ensuing 'rapporto di parità' (relation of parity) between him and his patients-subjects, the narrator sees himself as superior despite his openness to his surroundings.<sup>200</sup> The contrast between the narrator's description of his own sister and the female peasants in Lucania show how the men and women of Lucania are in a vertical rather than horizontal relationship to him due to his economic, political, existential and artistic advantages over them which aligns him with the political oppressors he purports to critique (he describes Giulia's fear of his as 'ben giustificat[a]'). Thus, Levi beats Giulia into submission and justifies this violence approach by excluding her from a human frame of

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<sup>196</sup> 'emanating an animalistic force' / 'she was like the beasts, a spirit of the earth'

<sup>197</sup> Lerner, p.14.

<sup>198</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, cited by Jacques Derrida, *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas* (Paris: Galilée, 1997), p.211.

<sup>199</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993), p.30. ('Under the weight of your languor, / your child's head, / hangs with the limpness / of a young elephant.')

<sup>200</sup> Mario Miccinesi, *Invito alla lettura di Carlo Levi* (Milano: Mursia, 1989), p.67.



reference on the one hand, in order to reinscribe her within conventional cultural gender narratives of motherhood and sin.

### **The creaturely as subaltern**

The animal imagery and marginalising semantics that ‘other’ the peasants reduce their potential for political subjectivity and hence the creature can be interpreted as a guise of the colonial subaltern as Spivak has depicted it. Indeed, Derobertis argues Levi’s use of ethnological, colonial discourse in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* shows the inherited biases acquired from his formative education under Fascist rule and the colonialist campaign in Abyssinia, which coincided with his isolation in Lucania.<sup>201</sup> I wish to focus on the nature of representation which Derobertis omits as it sheds crucial light into the paradoxes of Levi’s writing as both advocating the oppositional potential of the Lucanians whose difference and marginalisation separate them from the nefarious impact of the State, but at the same time entrenches their lack of political development by exposing their passive creaturely biopolitical exposure, undermining their political agency. Levi’s text emblematises the problems outlined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak her seminal essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ in that his depiction of the Lucanians as creaturely and yet biopolitically oppressed by the state exposes the ethical limits of representing a different group.

Spivak argues that two forms of representation are available to Western commentators on other cultures: on the one hand, ‘as “speaking for”’ ‘in state formation and the law’, as as ‘subject predication’ ‘in philosophy and art’ on the other.<sup>202</sup> Levi states that his friends from the North see him as a mediator between cultures: ‘mi avevano chiesto notizie del mezzogiorno; e a tutti avevo raccontato quell che avevo visto; e, se tutto mi avevano ascoltato con interesse, ben pochi mi era parso volessero realmente capire quello che dicevo’ (219). *Cristo* reflects the paradox of representation of the colonial other or the politically marginalised in Spivak’s analysis of Marx’s Eighteenth Brumaire: ‘the event of representation as *Vertretung* (the constellation of rhetoric as persuasion) behaves like a *Darstellung* (or rhetoric as trope) taking its place in the gap between the formation of a (descriptive) class and the non-formation of a (transformative) class’<sup>203</sup> There are instances in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* where Levi

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<sup>201</sup> Derobertis, *op.cit.* p.158.

<sup>202</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* ed. by Cary Nelson and Laurence Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp.271-316, p.277.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, p.277.

seems to be ventriloquizing the peasants. For example, the prologue claims to quote the inhabitants of Aliano: ‘non siamo cristiani, non siamo uomini, non siamo considerate come uomini, ma bestie, ancora meno delle bestie, i fruschi, i frusculicchi’ (3: ‘we are not Christians, we are not men, we are regarded as men, but beasts, worse than beasts, spirits, beasties’). *Fruschi* is borrowed from the local dialect, and as David Forgacs notes, cannot be interpreted as Levi trying to mimic the Lucanians’ speech but rather as ‘following traditional literary practice of leaving an exotic word untranslated’, and thus leaving his literary stamp on his transcription of the Lucanians’ speech.<sup>204</sup> Spivak, citing Macherey’s diagnosis of the imperialist text, notes how it operates by “‘investigating, identifying, and measuring ... the *deviation*” from an ideal that is irreducibly differential.”<sup>205</sup> Furthermore, Levi notes how he is idealised and admired by the peasants, who hope to serve and emulate him, thus acknowledging his moral, intellectual and political superiority. According to the narrator, Maria, a seventy-five-year-old woman ‘mi considerava il suo benefattore, il suo Salvatore misterioso: si sarebbe buttata nel fuoco per me’ (88: ‘regarded me as her benefactor, her mysterious Saviour: she would have thrown herself on the fire for me’). The woman’s apparent willingness to throw herself into the fire for the sake of Levi, which recalls the practice of ‘Sati’ or widow suicide that Spivak uses as a case study for the inability of Western cultures to observe difference in anything other than their own paradigms, proves the differentiation of Levi’s ‘translated subjects’. According to Derobertis, Levi’s memoir forms ‘text(ure) of diasporic modernities, subaltern memories’ since ‘the South reveals itself over time as a sensible transitional location for translated subjects: either the translated subjects of domestic colonialism or those of contemporary global neo-colonialism.’<sup>206</sup> By creating ‘subalterns’ through his creaturely depictions of the peasants, Levi is conforming to the paradox whereby the Western (or Northern Italian) subject is hegemonic, and his voiceless opposite can be appropriated only according to hegemonic representational mechanics. However, as will emerge, the emphasis on the creaturely subalternity of the Lucanians actually obfuscates the real ways in which the South of Italy has a role, albeit a passive and vertical one, in the contemporary politics of Fascist, imperialist Italy, as well as the way in which the South has been mobilised on behalf of Cold War politics in Italy after the war.

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<sup>204</sup> David Forgacs, *Italy’s Margins: Social Exclusion and Nation Formation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.159.

<sup>205</sup> Spivak, p.282.

<sup>206</sup> Derobertis, p.168. Derobertis refers to the condition of migrant peasants, mostly of African origin in Rosarno (Calabria) in contemporary Italy as the successors of Carlo Levi’s Lucanian peasants in an example of ‘global neocolonialism’ which has its origins in ‘European colonial “epistemic violence” in Africa.’, p.168.

## The negation of history

Calvino's description of the peasant civilisation as 'il mondo che vive fuori della storia al di fronte al mondo che vive nella storia' is emblematic of this idealisation of the peasants' lack of historical agency as a valuable ethical and existential mode in *Cristo*.<sup>207</sup> This is evident in the opening lines

Sono passati molti anni, pieni di Guerra, e di quello si usa chiamare la Storia. Spinto qua e là alla ventura, non ho potuto finora mantenere la mia promessa fatta, lasciandoli, *ai miei* contadini, di tornare fra loro [...]. Ma, chiuso in una stanza, e in un mondo chiuso, mi è grato riandare con la memoria a quell'altro mondo, serrato nel dolore e negli usi, negato alla Storia e allo Stato, eternamente paziente; a quella *mia* terra senza conforto e dolcezza, dove il contadino vive, nella miseria e nella lontananza, la sua immobile civiltà su un suolo arido, nella presenza della morte. (3)

Levi's attitude to his experience of exile from October 1935 to May 1936 appears here: firstly, history is a force which pushes the author 'here and there', giving the impression that he is deprived of historical agency himself; secondly, history is seen as a negative force which 'fills' time as opposed to the 'eternal patience' of the Lucanian peasants who live in an immemorial present; thirdly, the otherworldliness of Lucania is emphasised, excluding it from the violence of 'this world'; fourthly, the use of the possessive 'i miei contadini', 'quella mia terra' underlines Levi's creative copyright over the scenes of poverty and primitivity that he witnesses there; lastly, Levi's authorship addresses this world, by making the 'other world' a subject of his narration. From this we can assume that Levi believes that the ultimate validity of his otherworldly venture into the creaturely realm of Lucania can only be of benefit to 'this world', as the Lucanians are fatalistically depicted as being outside of history and therefore unable to impact upon it.

However, Derobertis, in his illuminating article, sees the 1935 Ethiopian invasion as a fundamental part of Levi's narrative rather than a mere socio-historical signposting device. Similarly, Moloney's historical analysis of *Cristo* in light of agricultural reform and peasant conditions from 1930 to 1950 in the Italian South notes that Levi's book is a novel of the peasantry 'in crisis.' Moloney defines 'peasant crisis' as 'the usually detrimental impact on peasant society of macro- rather than micro-politics, of national social, economic and political policies and changes.'<sup>208</sup> Moloney and Derobertis rightly critique Levi's ahistorical

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<sup>207</sup> Italo Calvino, 'La compresenza dei tempi' in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (Torino: Einaudi, 2010), pp.ix-xii (p.x): 'the world that lives outside of history and opposite the world that lives within history.'

<sup>208</sup> Moloney, p.20.

presentation of the peasantry by situating his text in the debates and upheavals of his time. By evoking the critical reception of *Cristo* to which I would add Levi's own ahistorical presentation of the Lucanians, Derobertis rightly diagnoses an unwillingness of Italian cultural discourse to acknowledge the peasants' enthusiastic aspirations for an Italian colonial state and their disappointment at its failure, as evinced by Derobertis' extensive archival research on peasant participation in the Ethiopian war in the 1930s: 'it is easy to see here, how in a simple analytical move, invoking abstract Eurocentric categories, Asor Rosa obliterates the whole war on Ethiopia and the consequences of this event for the protagonists of Levi's narrative.'<sup>209</sup> When it comes to Italy's disastrous colonial conquest of Ethiopia, Levi does not even consider the moral value of the conquest but rather views it as an event without relevance to the peasants who cannot imagine their lives being any different in Africa or in Lucania: 'morire sopra un'amba abissina non è poi molto peggio che morire di malaria nel proprio campo, sulla riva del Sauro' (116: 'dying below an Abyssinian mountain is not really much worse than dying of malaria in one's own field, on the banks of the Sauro'). This equivalence of Ethiopia and Lucania not only entrenches Levi's depiction of the area as primitive and backward, ready to be politically 'recolonised' for the sake of the Italian nation, but also demonstrates Levi's refusal to engage with the implications of colonisation, especially as he is liberated from political exile as an amnesty following the conquest of Addis Ababa (233). Plus, Levi's depiction of the peasants' lack of enthusiasm for the war ('I contadini di Gagliano non si appassionavano alla conquista dell'Abissinia' / 'the peasants of Gagliano were not interested in the conquest of Abyssinia', 121) makes them inherently more politically redeemable by disengaging with this uncomfortable historical legacy.

### **'Brutal Humanism' and the paradoxes of creatureliness**

The nexus of creatureliness and victimhood excludes the *contadini* from Italy's toxic political situation at the time of writing *Cristo* and for Levi, and paradoxically, their dehumanisation makes them epitomise the new humanism borne out of suffering and political oppression: 'la Guerra, la resistenza, il movimento contadino sono state e sono le grandi prove che hanno spezzato col dolore e col sangue la curva discendente della polverizzazione dell'uomo.'<sup>210</sup> As he stated in an interview, compassion for another's suffering is the prime

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<sup>209</sup> Derobertis cites Alberto Asor Rosa's *Scrittori e popolo. Il populismo nella letteratura italiana contemporanea* (1965) in which Levi's peasants are 'primitive beings', 'outside history, outside the uninterrupted but ultimately superficial flow of conquests and war.' Cited by Derobertis, p.161.

<sup>210</sup> Carlo Levi, 'sul nuovo umanesimo' in *Prima e dopo le parole: scritti e discorsi sulla letteratura*, ed. by Gigliola de Donato (Roma: Donzelli, 2001), pp.76-90, p.80: 'The war, the resistance and the peasant movement

access to another person's humanity in *Cristo*: 'attraverso le loro sofferenze [entrai] in solidarietà con loro.'<sup>211</sup> Levi theorised his new notion of humanism built on the notions of collectivity, relation and an essence common to mankind: 'un nuovo umanesimo non può nascere se non da una riscoperta dell'uomo come unità e come rapporto', this could be achieved through a return to the 'unity of man'.<sup>212</sup> This new humanism responds to a need for collectivity according to Levi: 'in quel senso che è il senso della storia, della comune esperienza fraterna di infiniti uomini, parliamo di nuovo umanesimo.'<sup>213</sup> The contrast between Levi's assertions that a new humanism will be achieved through 'a sense of history' and his descriptions of the political entrapment of the peasants outside of history reveals a fundamental inconsistency in Levi's political agenda that affirms his own political and authorial personality, and provides no avenues for emancipation. As the following section shows, Levi's deployment of the neorealist trope of what Karl Schoonover calls 'brutal humanism' aligns *Cristo* with the exonerative aesthetic project of neorealism depicting the inherent humanity of Italians in the aftermath of the 1943 Armistice and in the context of the economic reconstruction of Italy.

*Cristo* is widely considered to be a 'neorealist classic' as it gives an impressionistic account of poverty and suffering, enforced by an oppressive and distant fascist regime. Indeed, Italian film-maker Roberto Rossellini's definition of the neorealist style encapsulates many characteristics of Levi's narrative in *Cristo*:

What mattered to me was the man. I have tried to express the soul, the light that is in these men, their reality in its absolute intimacy and uniqueness attached to an individual with all the meaning of things that are around him. For things that are around him to have meaning, since there is someone who looks at them, or at least this meaning becomes unique by virtue of someone looking at them: the hero of each episode which is also the narrator.<sup>214</sup>

Furthermore, the book denotes a crisis of civilisation and the search for origins and resolutions echoing Comi and Pontzen's definition of neorealism: 'Im Kontext des Neorealismus versuchte man durch eine umfassende Kritik zu den verschütteten humanen

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have been and are great feats that have ruptured with pain and with blood the downward trend of man's pulverization.'

<sup>211</sup> Nancy Craig, 'Libertà e futuro' in Lombardi Satriani and Bindi (eds), *Un dolente amore per la vita: Conversazioni radiofoniche e interviste* (Roma: Donzelli, 2003), pp.3-10 (p.6): 'I became solidary with them through their suffering'

<sup>212</sup> Levi, 'sul nuovo umanesimo', pp.79-83, p.79: 'A new humanism can only appear as a rediscovery of man in his wholeness and in his relationality'

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, p.81.

<sup>214</sup> Cited by Jim Hillier, *Les Cahiers du Cinéma: the 1950s, Neorealism, Hollywood, New-Wave* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p.182.

Grundlagen einer zivilen Gesellschaft zurückkehren.’<sup>215</sup> Zavattini saw ‘convivenza’ – living together – based on full knowledge of one’s fellow Italians in the name of a shared democratic project, and the radical break with fascism as the ethical vein of neorealism.<sup>216</sup> In her study of neorealist cinema, Torun Haaland highlights Carlo Levi’s influence on the genre by exercising what she calls his ‘civic duty’ and restoring human dignity to the peasants of Aliano.<sup>217</sup> It is in the name of civic duty and ethical spectatorship that ‘Brutal Humanism’ invokes an imagined spectator, who at the sight of the brutalized body ‘is overcome with political pathos, cosmopolitan goodwill, liberal guilt and charitable imperatives.’<sup>218</sup> With the definition of brutal humanism as ‘the strange symbiosis of violence and humanitarianism, spectacular suffering and benefaction,’ the portrayal of the ‘brutalized body’ in neorealist films (physically and emotionally destitute in the aftermath of war) grounds, according to Schoonover, a ‘global empathy in cinematic corporeality.’<sup>219</sup> For Schoonover, in a striking echo of Carlo Levi, the humanism of neorealism relies on suffering to awaken the spectator’s compassion, an affect that is aligned with predominant economic and political interests: ‘We only have access to our common humanity in moments of seeing the suffering of others [...] A suffering body is needed to understand the category of the human.’<sup>220</sup> I argue that Levi addresses this imagined spectator throughout *Cristo*, and in the following example, I show that Levi’s depiction of the innocent Southern poor became a crucible for debate about the economic and political regeneration of the South.

The brutal humanism of Levi’s text mobilises the creatureliness of an impoverished and oppressed underclass to evoke compassion and charitable actions from the establishment and abroad. This is most clear in the narrator’s sister’s account of the awful living conditions in Matera’s troglodite caves, the *Sassi*, where disease and poverty reduce their inhabitants to crawling, uncanny monsters:

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<sup>215</sup> Anna Comi, Alexandra Pontzen, ‘Vorwort’ in *Italien in Deutschland. Deutschland in Italien*, ed. by Anna Comi and Alexandra Pontzen (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1999), pp.5-10, p.10: ‘in the context of neorealism, a return to the shaken human foundations of a civil society was attempted through a comprehensive critique.’

<sup>216</sup> See Torunn Haaland, *Italian neorealist cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp.410-412. Cesare Zavattini, ‘Some Ideas on the Cinema’ in *Vittorio de Sica: Contemporary Perspectives* ed. by Howard Curle and Stephen Snyder (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), pp.50-61, p.60.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, p.83

<sup>218</sup> Schoonover, p.xix, xvii.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xiv, xv.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.* p.xx.

ho visto dei bambini seduti sull'uscio delle case, nella sporcizia [...] altri bambini incontravo, coi visi grinzosi come dei vecchi, e scheletrici per la fame [...] altri si trascinavano a stento, ridotti pelle e ossa dalla dissenteria [...] a me pareva di esser capitata in mezzo a una città colpita dalla peste (76).<sup>221</sup>

Emphasising the plight of children in makeshift dwellings ('dentro quelli buchi neri, dalle pareti di terra, vedevo i letti' / 'in those black holes with earth walls, I saw the beds', 76), Luisa's portrayal of dehumanisation paradoxically implores human compassion through the spectacular nature of human suffering in Matera: 'uno spettacolo come quello di ieri non l'avevo mai neppure immaginato' (76: 'I had never imagined a spectacle like the one I saw yesterday'). Toxley argues that Carlo Levi's explicit intention in the depiction of the squalid depictions of Matera was to galvanize public opinion against the Fascist regime that had brought this negligence about.<sup>222</sup> Indeed, in his speech to the Materans in 1965, Levi notes 'I have spoken of you to the world, and now I return to tell you about the world', confirms how *Cristo* sediments his position as a privileged anti-fascist citizen exercising his political sovereignty.<sup>223</sup> Thus, the 'brutal humanism' of Levi's narrative brought about concrete political and economic interventions on behalf of the Materans.

Terry Kirk confirms the concrete impact of *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* upon reconstruction after the Second World War; the creaturely depictions of the *Sassi* dwellers caused such an outrage that a subsequent outburst of charitable giving as well as reconstruction policies ensued to rectify this injustice: 'In the book [*Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*] [Levi] described the appalling living conditions of Matera [...] The disclosure of the Stone Age habitat horrified the nation, and an Italo-American task force of sociologists, anthropologists, economists and urbanists was sent to investigate.'<sup>224</sup> The involvement of American scientists and politicians in the redressing of Matera's dire living conditions chimes with the dawning American investment in the notion of the 'humanity' of the Western bloc which culminated in Edward Steichen's hugely popular, and widely controversised exhibition 'the Family of Man' at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1955 sponsored by the American Information Agency (USIA). Depicting scenes of normalcy and harmony, the show was billed as one 'that

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<sup>221</sup> 'I saw children sitting on the threshold of the houses, in the filth... I saw other children with the wrinkled faces of old men, emaciated with hunger ... others could hardly drag themselves around, reduced to skin and bone by dysentery... I felt as though I had ended up in the middle of a city devastated by the plague'

<sup>222</sup> Anne Parmely Toxley, *Materan Contradictions: Architecture, Preservation and Politics* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p.85.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>224</sup> Terry Kirk, *The Architecture of Modern Italy: Vision and Utopia 1900-* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005), p.156.

you see with the heart’ and promoted the ideological agenda of an apparently ahistorical ‘post-national kind of citizenship and commonality’ under the banner of conventional patriarchal, Christian, protestant-affluent values promoting America as a the standard-bearer of humanity.

<sup>225</sup> Roland Barthes in his critique of the exhibition targets the way in which the

content and appeal of the pictures, and the discourse used to justify them, aims to suppress the determining weight of History: we are held back at the surface of an identity, prevented by sentimentality from penetrating into this ulterior zone of human behaviour where historical alienation introduces some “differences” which we shall here simply call *injustices*.<sup>226</sup>

The recent wartime past is absent, so are issues of class and race, with only the universal threat of atomic war guaranteeing the inherent natural value of a common humanity. As this example of Cold War propaganda shows, ‘humanity’ came to be understood as the commonality of moral values based on compassion and goodwill at the heart of the American political self-identification; the immediate involvement of American investigators in the Matera case following Levi’s indictment in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* are a symptom of the concrete political and economic gains to be made as a result of the spectacular function of ‘brutal humanism’. Such displays of human suffering and their appeal to international goodwill as Levi’s description of the Sassi dwellers may also chime with a concrete political agenda of ‘democratic education’ in the context of the developing Cold War conflict. Indeed, Steichen’s exhibition has been considered as an exercise in the ‘democratic personality’ by encouraging spectators’ ‘mutual recognition, choice and empathy – the core perceptual and affective skills on which democracy depended,’ and qualities that humanistic interpretations of Levi’s text emphasise.<sup>227</sup> Levi’s dehumanising description profoundly affected the native population, who lashed out against him in press interviews:

*Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* is a fantasy book [...] in which all, under the deforming eye of a modern creator of myths is altered and takes monstrous proportions. It does not document an objective reality, but a lived reality of an uneasy fantasy of an exiled person [...]. Reading this book pains Lucanians like a slap in the face. [...] They are right to feel this way because they have been described in a repugnant

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<sup>225</sup> Sarah E. James, ‘A post-fascist *family of man*? Cold War Humanism, Democracy and Photography in Germany’, *The Oxford Art Journal*, 35:3 (2012), pp.315-336, p.336. Bazin defined ‘neorealism’ as a cinema that ‘opened the hearts of everybody’, Bazin, ‘De Sica’, p.83.

<sup>226</sup> Roland Barthes, ‘The great family of man’ in *Mythologies*, tr. Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press, 1972), pp.100-102, p.101.

<sup>227</sup> Fred Turner, ‘The Family of Man and the Politics of Attention in Cold War America’, *Public Culture* 24:1 (2012), pp.55-84, p.57,58.



manner and because they feel misunderstood, disfigured, slandered and degraded to the depravity of a dishonest falsification [...].<sup>228</sup>

Despite protests from native Materans about Levi's 'exploitation of their misery' and 'offence,' the book had a concrete impact on housing and reconstruction policy and reform; although Matera was most famous for its 1942 food riots, it became subsumed into the debate around housing reconstruction following the aerial Allied bombing of Italy.<sup>229</sup> Though Matera in fact lost no habitations during the war, the city came to symbolise the nation's housing crisis, to the extent that following Levi's literary denunciation of Materan living conditions, and the subsequent Italo-American investigation, the 1947 Milan Triennale focused solely on the housing crisis. This convention instituted the 1948 INA-Casa housing legislation which provided much subsidy for housing throughout Italy until 1963; in the same year, the Istituto Nazionale dell'Urbanistica (INU) was founded to provide housing for the inhabitants of Matera and the *Sassi*.<sup>230</sup> Thus, the Materan *Sassi* scandal became the banner for the national housing crisis, which itself was instigated by Allied Bombing which had not actually touched Matera but accounted for the 6 per cent loss of housing across the peninsula, leading Toxley to conclude that 'the full scale sacrifice of Matera for political goals began with Carlo Levi.'<sup>231</sup> So, the slippage of Materan poverty into the victimhood caused by Allied bombing proves the significance of Levi's text for subsequent definitions of national identity and the drive toward reconstruction.

The animal idiom used to depict the biopolitical drama of the Lucanian contadini reveals that creatureliness – the slippery identification of the human being with the animal – highlights Levi's investment in political passivity as historically redemptive on the one hand, as well as his unsettling complicity with the sovereign structures that oppress the peasants. The creature's lack of voice removes him from the taint of historical complicity in Levi's narrative, which obfuscates the historical reality of fascist consensus and colonial enthusiasm in Southern Italy and naturalises the gendered relations presented in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*. Fundamentally, the creature epitomises the triangular paradox at the heart of the memoir; on the one hand, the ahistorical creature, harking back to an archaic primitivity outside of the vicissitudes of politics, is a source of political redemption for Levi; on the other, the creature is a symptom of the exclusionary and violence practices at the heart of political, economic and

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<sup>228</sup> Toxley, p.84.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, p.83.

<sup>230</sup> See Kirk, p.157.

<sup>231</sup> Toxley, p.83

gendered relations; finally, the creature epitomises the dehumanising failures of statehood and community, invites compassion and an outburst of humanitarian feeling through his spectacular suffering – an ethical object in its very degradation. While *Cristo* dramatises the relation of creatureliness to modes of state power and sovereignty, Bernhard's *Frost* envisions the creature as an index of the traumatic after-effects of the recent past.

### **Thomas Bernhard's *Frost*: Unsettled in history.**

In my analysis of Thomas Bernhard's novel, I will discuss the transmission of history onto the dehumanised body, and assess the implications for an elaboration of national identity based on victimhood, and examine the disturbance of the notion of humanity as a result of the violence of the past. By comparing *Frost* to *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* for the first time, a transnational constellation of discomfiting complicities, discourses of animality and difference, and contrasting hopes and anxieties regarding the importance of a historical legacy and its potential for the future will emerge.

With *Frost*, published in 1963, Bernhard committed to depicting his vision of contemporary Austria and its origins in a radical break from the models that had preceded him:

Aber ich glaub', vor dem "Frost" hat's in dieser Art im Grund wirklich nichts gegeben. Es war erstmalig dieser Art zu schreiben. Die Literatur nach dem Krieg war ja orientiert an allem, an der berühmten Literatur, die aus Amerika und England und Frankreich gekommen war. Damals, außer den Nazidichtern, Nazidichter unter Anführungszeichen [...] [ist] kein Mensch auf die Idee gekommen, dass er das beschreibt, wo er lebt und wo er aufgewachsen ist und wovon er wirklich was weiß.<sup>232</sup>

Set in an Alpine backwater full of hideous, undereducated, impoverished inhabitants, *Frost* provides a complete contrast to the post-war idealisation of the Austrian Alpine hinterland as a source of the moral purity of a nation of simple, healthy values, in what Bernhard perceived to be radical reversal of a tainted subject matter.<sup>233</sup> Thus, the novel reveals the critical potential of an 'Anti-Heimat' literature that problematises the latent continuities with wartime violence in Austria, despite the radical divorce from the past the widespread

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<sup>232</sup> Kurt Hofmann, *Aus Gesprächen mit Thomas Bernhard* (München: DTV, 1991), p.26: 'But I think, before *Frost*, there had been nothing of this kind before. It was the first time anyone had written this way. Literature after the war was oriented towards everything, towards this famous literature, that had come from England and America. At that time, apart from the Nazi poets, Nazi poets in inverted commas [...] no one had come up with the idea to describe where they lived, and where they grew up and a place they actually knew something about.'

<sup>233</sup> The Austrian Alpine landscape was the subject of the wave of so-called 'Heimatfilme' of the 1940s and 1950s which focused on the harmonious landscape and the bond between man and nature – a symptom of what Gertrud Steiner has called 'eine Selbstverteidigungsreaktion der konservativ herrschenden Mächten' in *Die Heimatmacher: Österreichisches Kino 1946-1966* (Wien: Verlag für Gesellschaftskritik, 1987), p.14.

endorsement of the myth of Austria as ‘Hitler’s First Victim’ perpetuated. Bernhard has always been regarded as one of the sharpest critics of the Austrian disavowal of Nazi crimes; his reputation as a ‘Netzbeschmutzer’ and ‘Vaterlandverräter’ was consolidated among conservative critics with his 1988 play *Heldenplatz*.<sup>234</sup> Bernhard’s notion of tainted homeland corresponds to Sebald’s analysis of Austrian ‘Heimatsideologie’ in which ‘die Unheimlichkeit der Heimat wird durch das verschiedenlichste Auftreten von Wiedergängern und Vergangengheitsgespenstern öfter als lieb ins Bewusstsein gerufen.’<sup>235</sup> Whereas the Italian South was regarded as the ‘anti-nation’, Bernhard’s depiction of a rural Hinterland in which the traces of a violent historical legacy reappear is both unhomely and uncanny, and as such the provinces reveal much about the crystallised anxieties relating to the Austrian nation as a whole.<sup>236</sup>

The homeland’s uncanny contamination by the spectres of the recent past is the sign of a deep malaise for Heinrich Böll, who, in, his 1964 Frankfurt Lectures, laments the fissure of the individual from his surroundings: ‘die provinzierische Angst der Deutschen vor Provinzialität verhindert das vertraute Verhältnis zur Umwelt, damit also die Bildung der Welt,’ resulting in ‘das Nicht-Wohnen-Können der Deutschen.’<sup>237</sup> The human and geographical bond of the home have become suspect, contaminated by Nazi ideology of *Blut und Boden*, and this reflects a fundamental fissure in post-war society according in which ‘das Humane scheint suspekt zu sein.’<sup>238</sup> The unsettling homeland atomises the unsettled human being, buffeted by his exposure to history; the young doctor describes his encounters in the Pongau region as ‘ein Gang durch ein vormenschenwürdiges Jahrtausend’ (11) and the painter notes that the area is populated by people who have devolved to a primitive state: ‘Sie fallen in ihren Urzustand zurück [...] Hier sind die Menschen wie Tiere ... Bruchstücke eines fremden

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<sup>234</sup> The number of sources on Bernhard’s critique of Austria is vast; Oliver Bentz views Bernhard’s Austrian critique in the light of the Waldheim Affair and Heldenplatz scandal in *Thomas Bernhard: Dichtung als Skandal* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2000); see also Charles W. Martin, *The Nihilism of Thomas Bernhard* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995), pp.11-17 for an overview of early critical resources on Thomas Bernhard’s attitude to Austrian politics and the Nazi past; Gitta Honegger, *Thomas Bernhard: The Making of An Austrian* (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp.128-148.

<sup>235</sup> W.G. Sebald, *Unheimliche Heimat: Essays zur Österreichischen Literatur* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1995), p.15-16: ‘The unhomeliness of the homeland comes to the forefront of consciousness more often than desired through the most diverse revenants and spectres of the past.’

<sup>236</sup> John Foot, *Modern Italy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), p.14.

<sup>237</sup> Heinrich Böll, ‘Frankfurter Vorlesungen’, *Essayistische Schriften und Reden* (Köln: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1966), pp.34-92, pp.83-84: ‘The Germans’ provincial fear of provinciality impedes a familiar relationship to the environment, as well as the formation of a world.’ / ‘the Germans’ inability to live’

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.* p.56: ‘What is human appears to be suspect.’

Lebens' (56).<sup>239</sup> Thus, the dehumanised inhabitants of Weng seem, for the narrators of *Frost*, to be shaped by the corrupting traces of recent history which inscribes itself onto their very physicality: 'die Spuren des Krieges sind noch nicht verwischt... dieser Krieg wird nie vergessen sein. Immer wieder werden die Menschen auf ihn stoßen.' (117)<sup>240</sup> While most of the critical literature on *Frost* examines the novel's philosophical import and linguistic particularities, I focus on the political repercussions of Bernhard's depiction of creaturely embodiment in this chapter and its impact upon national identity, historical agency and an understanding of the human.<sup>241</sup>

Critic Katya Krylova has recently published an analysis of the topography of Weng 'as a topography resembling a disfigured and ailing body, symptomatic of the malaise of the Alpine republic as a whole,' whose 'preoccupation with disfigured humanity consistently evokes the dimension of the creaturely.'<sup>242</sup> For Krylova, the 'experience of the creaturely in *Frost*', which she identifies in the painter Strauch, 'serves to address broader questions of dehumanised humanity in a postwar context.'<sup>243</sup> By building on her illuminating analysis, I argue that the creaturely characterises not only an abstract sense of dehumanisation and malaise but brings to bear Bernhard's attitudes to historical agency and political consciousness. I suggest that *Frost* mobilises creatureliness in the context of post-war Austria in the following ways: Firstly, the narrators' depiction of the creaturely embodiment of Strauch and the inhabitants of Weng reveals an investment in an embodied passivity which can only ever be exposed to, and therefore victim of, the vicissitudes of state sovereignty and history from which the individual is profoundly alienated. This, in my view, ultimately defers the necessity to deal with issues of guilt and atonement in the elaboration of national identity. While Fatima Naqvi argues that Bernhard's incendiary 1988 play *Heldenplatz* achieves an overcoming of the victimhood/perpetrator binary by dramatising how 'these binarisms inhibit critical judgement or political action,' *Frost* reveals much rawer anxieties about the entrapment of the individual

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<sup>239</sup> 'a passage through a millennium not yet suited to human life' / 'They regress to their original state [...] Here the humans are like animals ... fragments of an alien life'

<sup>240</sup> 'the traces of the war are not yet wiped out [...] this war will never be forgotten. People will continue to come up against it.'

<sup>241</sup> See Gernot Weiss, *Auslöschung der Philosophie: Philosophiekritik bei Thomas Bernhard* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1993); J.J. Long, *The Novels of Thomas Bernhard: Form and its Function* (London: Camden House, 2001); Samuel Frederick, *Narratives Unsettled: Digression in Robert Walser, Thomas Bernhard and Adalbert Stifter* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2012).

<sup>242</sup> Katya Krylova, *Walking Through History: Topography and Identity in the works of Ingeborg Bachmann and Thomas Bernhard* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013), p.135,121.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, p.111-112.

by a crushing state apparatus, perpetuating a violent and toxic legacy.<sup>244</sup> Secondly, creatureliness represents the experience of post-war political and industrial reconstruction, whereby Bernhard problematises the subjugation of human freedom and fulfilment to the inhuman demands of re-establishing the nation in a Cold War context. Lastly, *Frost* deploys a creaturely iconography to problematise the impact of war on the idea of humanism and I conjecture that Bernhard's first novel contains an underexplored humanitarian angle whereby the sprawling nihilism of the narrative conceals a concern for the integrity of the human by paying attention to the spectacle of abject suffering, echoing the 'brutal humanism' identifiable in Levi's narrative.

### **The impasse of creatureliness: passivity, agency and representation.**

*Frost*'s protagonist, an isolated and eccentric painter, is first encountered in the sombre environment of Weng through the lens of the young doctor. The painter makes an uncanny impression ('Er ist mir unheimlich', 31) and is described as a hybrid of different identities 'als wäre er Viehtreiber, Stock und Schlachtvieh' (10: 'like a cattle drover, stick and animal for slaughter'), revealing both his violent bestiality and passive creatureliness ('er ist so hilflos' / 'he is so helpless', 11). Strauch has been staying at the miserable inn since wartime out of 'eine Anhänglichkeit an die Kriegszeit, in der das Gasthaus für ihn [...] Unterschlupf gewesen war' (22: 'out of an attachment to wartime, when the inn was a shelter to him'). The term 'Unterschlupf', suggesting shelter or refuge rather than 'Wohnplatz' where someone lives, is an indicator of a hurried biological adaptation to a foreign environment as a response to an external threat; hence, Strauch inhabits Weng as a habitat, as a place to survive rather than live, contributing to his uncanny liminality between animal and human, which renders him creaturely.

As Krylova has observed, Strauch's bent posture likens him to the creature spotted by Walter Benjamin in the work of Kafka, 'das bücklichte Männlein'. Strauch's walk is more like a crawl ('mehr gekrochen als gegangen ist er', 39) and he is hunchbacked ('[er] ging ganz gebückt', 17).<sup>245</sup> For Benjamin, the creature is an index of a redemption that is always deferred and whose cringed physique is a symptom of the dehumanisation of modernity: 'Dieses Männlein ist der Insasse des entstellten Lebens; er wird verschwinden, wenn der Messias

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<sup>244</sup> Fatima Naqvi, 'Dialectic at a Standstill: the Discourse of Victimhood in Thomas Bernhard's *Heldenplatz*', *German Quarterly* 75:4 (Autumn 2002), pp.408-421, p.417.

<sup>245</sup> 'He crawled rather than walked' / 'he went along completely bent over'

kommt, von dem ein großer Rabbi gesagt hat, dass er nicht mit Gewalt die Welt verändern wolle, sondern nur um ein Geringes zu zurechtstellen werde.'<sup>246</sup> Yet, by drawing on Santner's theory of creatureliness as a traumatic biopolitical mode of existence where the collapse of the human into the animal is a symptom of the traumatic conditions of modernity, Krylova rightly points out that Bernhard undermines the possibility of redemption through his despairing portrayal of stasis infecting the landscape and people of Weng.<sup>247</sup> Her illuminating study of the creaturely in *Frost* accounts for Strauch's association with dogs, and therefore melancholia, and with sacrificial animals ('Vieh') and while she highlights that the presentation of Strauch by the doctor '[underscores] the vulnerability and innocence of the creature', Krylova does not explore the relationship of such an evaluation to an elaboration of national identity or historical agency.<sup>248</sup> Indeed, it is productive here to follow Beatrice Hanssen's line of enquiry which examines Walter Benjamin's explorations of the 'creatural' (a body of matter that Benjamin calls 'die Kreatur', for which creation is the common denominator) inviting an 'ethico-theological response.'<sup>249</sup> By examining the trajectory of Benjamin's concept of the 'creature' throughout his work from the lowliest form of human debasement to the righteous man who stands for and represents all of creation, Hanssen comes to see the inherent political difficulty of Benjamin's philosophy of creatureliness in his figure of 'das bücklicht Männlein'. As Hanssen sees it, the creaturely represents an impasse in Benjamin's philosophy which 'failed to explain how the ethical and the political were to be negotiated or how an attentiveness to the creaturely was to be negotiated with a political model anchored in human agency.'<sup>250</sup> Even Santner's secular analysis, despite overcoming the messianic investment in the creature, presents the impasse of man's traumatic entrapment in the political as a 'product of [man's] exposure to a traumatic dimension of political power.'<sup>251</sup> The embodiment of this exposure is described by Santner as a 'signifying stress' at the heart of creaturely experience, which is

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<sup>246</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Franz Kafka: Zum zehnten Wiederkehr seines Todestages', *Gesammelte Schriften* II.2, pp.409-438, p.432; 'Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death', *Illuminations*, tr. Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp.108-135, p.130: 'This little man is at home in distorted life; he will disappear when the messiah comes, of whom a great rabbi once said, that he did not wish to change the world by force, but only make a slight adjustment.'

<sup>247</sup> Krylova, p.23.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, p.124.

<sup>249</sup> Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Alternative History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings and Angels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p.162.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.* p.7.

<sup>251</sup> Santner, 2006, p.12.

dubiously generalised – in LaCapra’s view – as a ‘foundational, originary, transhistorical trauma’, obliterating the potential for human agency or resistance.<sup>252</sup>

Further to Krylova’s analysis that does not take into account the modes of representation and self-presentation in the depiction of the experience of creatureliness, I argue that Strauch’s creatureliness has two aspects, underpinned by two different modes of narrative representation: firstly, the impressions of the young doctor, who so is horrified at the painter’s appearance ‘dass ich mich ganz in mich zurückzog’ (11: ‘that I completely retreated into myself’), set up Strauch’s uncanniness; secondly, Strauch actively encourages his own self-definition as creaturely. Unlike in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* where the animal-like Lucanians have no representative authority over themselves, Strauch takes over his own self-representation, and questions the validity of defining himself as human.

From the trainee’s first encounter with Strauch the painter to the end of the novel, the text is dominated by either direct quotations of the protagonist’s ravings or indirect speech indicated by the use of Konjunktiv I. The doctor quotes him describing himself as an animal (‘Wie ein Einschlafender sich zurechtrückt, ganz Tier, habe er sich zurechtgerückt’/ ‘Like someone falling asleep straightens up, just like an animal, he straightened up’, 96), further on Strauch sees himself as an ‘accursed’ animal who has traversed the animal/human threshold: ‘ich [bin] dann noch nur ein verfluchtes Tier [...] ich habe die Grenze schon überschritten’ (240: ‘then I’m only a cursed animal [...] I have already crossed the limit’). In an episode where Strauch discovered some slaughtered animals in the forest, the gradual disclosure of the massacred animals provokes an animal transformation in him which he relates to the doctor. At first he sees a red stream ‘der ganze Bach war voll Blut’ (‘the whole stream was full of blood’), and immediately identifies the water with some form of criminal human violence ‘ohne Zweifel der Ausläufer eines Verbrechens, wie ich ganz klar erkannte, eines Menschenverbrechens’ (231: ‘without a doubt the spillage of a crime, of what I clearly recognised to be a human crime’). He begins to crawl around in the bloody snow (‘ich kroch aus meinem Versteck’/ ‘I crawled out of my hiding place’, 232), as the spectacle of violence enhances his animal qualities: ‘ich robbte mich, robbte mich, tatsächlich, müssen Sie wissen, robbte mich auf dem Bauch in die Nähe des Baches’ (231: ‘I crawled, crawled, really, you must know, crawled on my belly near the stream’). This crucial episode reveals the apparent

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<sup>252</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *History at its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), p.10.

continuity of Strauch's creaturely embodiment and the experience of violence. By underlining the animality of his movements, and explicitly identifying himself as a 'cursed animal', Strauch endorses his own representation as creaturely despite the uncanny horror this mode of representation evokes in the doctor when he first sees him.

Furthermore, Strauch emphasises the innocence of the creature by referring to his compassion for the dead animals: '[ich] hütete mich [...] dem Öffnen eines der großen Augen [...] bis zu dem Zeitpunkt, in welchem ich die Versuchung, mich dem Mitleid, das alles Viehische mit dem Menschen hat, auszuliefern, nicht mehr gewachsen war' (233: 'I forbore till the moment when I was no longer equal to the temptation to give myself over to the sympathy that any thing animal has with the human, and I opened one of the cow's eyes.')<sup>253</sup> Overwhelmed with pity for the animals' violent death, he explicitly aligns himself with this creaturely compassion. While Strauch is on the one hand emphasising the innocence of the creature and its vulnerability to violence in this episode, on the other, he claims that the sight of violence overwhelms him with a sense of paralysing passivity which stems from his experience of creatureliness. He claims that he is incapable of reporting the slaughter, even though two witnesses pass by as he is looking at 'der Schauplatz des Verbrechens' (234: 'the stage of suffering'):

Ich hätte ja auch nicht das geringste tun können. In meiner Verfassung, ein Mensch in meiner Verfassung, kann in solchen Fällen nichts tun. Ein solcher Mensch flüchtet [...] zieht zurück von Blut und verbrecherischen Geräuschen. [...] Ich robbte ja, wie ich schon sagte, hin wie ein Vieh. Verstehen Sie: ich war diesem Schauplatz, ich war diesem Bild einfach ausgeliefert. (234)<sup>254</sup>

The helplessness that the doctor already highlighted in his first encounter with Strauch is compounded by his experience of an animal-like vulnerability brought on by the sight of violence. Creatureliness is explicitly associated with passivity, the incapacity to act, in the face of the cattle slaughter that Strauch clearly describes as a human crime (233). Indeed, Strauch emphasises his lack of agency by highlighting his weakness and passivity on several other occasions (for example: 'ich bin tief unfähig, ganz tief unfähig' / 'I am deeply incapable, quite deeply incapable', 75). Moreover, he always carries *Pensées* by Pascal with him which resonates with his passive self-presentation as the French religious philosopher asserted that

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<sup>253</sup> Thomas Bernhard, *Frost*, tr. Michael Hoffmann (London: Vintage, 2008), p.298

<sup>254</sup> 'I wouldn't have been able to do the slightest thing. In my condition, a human being in my condition, can do nothing in such instances. A human being like that flees [...] retreats from blood and criminal noises. [...] I was really crawling, as I said, like a beast. You must understand: I was at the mercy of this stage, of this image.'



man's agency was powerless in the face of divine mystery because 'man is only a reed, the weakest in nature'.<sup>255</sup> Strauch's name meaning 'shrub', echoes the creatural vulnerability of Pascal's reed.

Disturbingly, this episode displays the result of a violent act and the passivity of the witness but says nothing of the perpetrators, alluding only to broad categories of 'human criminality', rather than making any explicit accusations of Austrian complicity in the ambient violence of Weng. Explicit incidences of wartime violence are attributed to other parties, namely the French and political prisoners; in a passage describing the wartime situation in Weng, Strauch notes how the French liberated prisoners who then wreaked havoc: 'und die haben das ganze Land überschwemmt und es hat in jedem Ort Mordfälle [...] gegeben' (82: 'and they flooded the whole country and there were murders everywhere'). Liberated by the French, these prisoners may well have been Nazi opponents or racially persecuted, and by emphasising their dangerous criminality, *Frost* depicts Austria as a nation under siege by wartime chaos and undesirable foreign presence. Similarly, he discovers a herd of murdered horses assumed to have come under French machine gun fire ('man weiß nicht, wer sie geschossen hat. Man vermutet, französische Maschinengewehre', 83). By contrast, Strauch as a returning soldier ('Kriegsheimkehrer', 82) had to hide in the landscape to avoid being targeted by foreign murderers. By disavowing any concrete Austrian involvement and focusing on victims rather than perpetrators, Bernhard's chief narrator elaborates a national narrative based on victimhood, which may imply that the author is commenting upon a prevalent denial of historical responsibility in Austria, or wishfully endowing Strauch's words with verisimilitude in contrast to Weishard's argument: 'Bernhard will ganz Österreich das Prozess machen und dem österreichischen Volk eine Kollektivschuld zuweisen.'<sup>256</sup> In *Frost*, the National Socialist past is alluded to in general terms but never concretely mentioned ('crime' is referred to twenty-one times) and the recurrent images of falling snow attribute to Strauch's obfuscation of complicity with National Socialism in Weng rather than depicting a collective Austrian guilt as critics have claimed hitherto, making *Frost* a complex and ambiguous text with regard to Bernhard's alleged candid engagement with Austrian *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.

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<sup>255</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, tr. A. Krailshaimer (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1966), p.66.

<sup>256</sup> Helène Weishard, 'Thomas Bernhard: Ein politischer Autor? Drei Variationen zum Thema Staat' in *Österreich und andere Katastrophen*, ed. by Jeanne Benay and Peter Behar (St.Ingbert: Röhrig Universitätsverlag, 2001), pp.143-160, p.146: 'He wants to put all of Austria on trial and assign a collective guilt to the Austrian people.'

The nexus of creatureliness and passivity in the face of violence buffers this interpretation significantly. As well as being embodied, passivity inscribes itself into the logic of the text, as the doctor loses his narrative authority and yields to Strauch's. For Gössling, Bernhard's novels are marked by 'der formal dominante Icherzähler, der gebannt dem nicht enden wollenden Monolog eines inhaltlich übermächtigen Protagonist lauscht.'<sup>257</sup> Indeed, by overtaking the doctor's representational authority, Strauch becomes the creator of the doctor's text and provokes such an existential crisis in the young trainee that he begins to see himself fully at the painter Strauch's mercy ('Ich bin ihm ja ausgeliefert. Verzeihen Sie'/ 'I really am at his mercy, forgive me', 240) which is also expressed in creaturely terms: when Strauch asks to be left alone, the narrator is like a dog off its lead ('ein Hund von der Leine gelassen', 123). By being imprisoned in Strauch's worldview which emphasises violence and vulnerability without the power to act, the doctor adopts his position of victimhood and subjection: 'Ich hatte das Gefühl, als hätte mich der Maler, als hätte mich Strauch, als hätte mich dieser Mensch schon in seiner Gewalt [...] ich empfand eine plötzliche Kerkerhaft' (237: 'I had the impression that the painter, that Strauch, that this person already had me at his mercy... I felt trapped'). As the majority of the text is filtered through direct quotation or indirect speech, the doctor becomes a mouthpiece for Strauch's views to the extent that he is unable to maintain any narrative authority or independent thought by the end of the novel, making passivity and subjection a narrative mode of the novel itself.<sup>258</sup> The letters ('Meine Briefe an den Assistenten Strauch', 250) that feature at the very end of the novel and interrupt the observation of the twenty-sixth and twenty-seventh days in Weng testify to the narrative instability of the Famulant. The doctor claims at the start of his journey that he will be able to be clear-headed and authoritative in his study of Strauch: 'Dass ich die mir vorgeschriebene Linie des klaren, berechnenden Verstandes in dem mir von Ihnen zugewiesenen Bereich beizuhalten in der Lage bin [...], erachte ich als möglich und in der Folge als selbstverständlich.'<sup>259</sup> While the content of the letters starts with the doctor's optimism in the soundness of his observational methodology and ends with a despairing abandonment of any explanatory paradigm whatsoever, it is difficult to say that the first letter was chronologically the first to be written,

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<sup>257</sup> Andreas Gössling, *Thomas Bernhards frühe Prosa* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1987), p.1: 'a formally dominant first-person narrator who listens to the monologue of a content-dominating protagonist that does not want to end.'

<sup>258</sup> J. J. Long, *The Novels of Thomas Bernhard: Form and its Function* (London: Camden House, 2001), p.41.

<sup>259</sup> 'In my view, it is possible, and in due course certain, that I will be able to adhere to the line of clarity and logic in my treatment of the prescribed subject', tr. Michael Hoffmann, p.319.

and that the letters are not a further attempt to categorise the disintegration of explanatory discourse written *post facto* by the Famulant. As J.J. Long argues

there is a profound diremption between the narrative linearity promised by the diary form and the narrative stasis created both by the paradigmatic relations between individual fragments, and by the fact that the narrator's sojourn in Weng remains an isolated episode, severed from its consequences for his future experience. The tension between linear narrative sequences and analogically related episodes produces at the level of narrative from the confrontation of sanity and madness that forms the thematic nexus of the text.<sup>260</sup>

Here again, the complex narrative prism of *Frost* signifies that the reader is aware of the progressive degradation of the doctor's representational control – a process he is unable to resist – which raises difficult questions as to the role of the reader in this quasi voyeuristic experience of the witnessing disintegration of a subject's ability to exercise his agency and his increasing exposure or subjection to the will of Strauch.

The theme of 'ausgeliefert sein' (being at the mercy of or helpless) recurs throughout Bernhard's *oeuvre* to encapsulate a sense of exposure to uncontrollable events posing physical, as well as existential, threats to the subject. In his autobiographical *Der Atem: Eine Entscheidung*, 'Auslieferung' defines the young Bernhard's experience of being helplessly ill in a Viennese sanatorium, at the mercy of his illness, the medical staff, his parents' neglect described as circumstances ('Geschehnisse') out of his control.<sup>261</sup> 'Ausgeliefert', a 1978 short story, captures a woman's anxiety about her isolation and exposure to the violence of the others. She acquires a dog for protection ('weil sie sich jetzt alles zu fürchten hatte' / 'because she now had everything to fear'), but once her remoteness becomes unbearable, she kills the dog and gives herself over to the human world she had feared for so long 'sie hatte [...] sich den Menschen ausgeliefert.'<sup>262</sup> The woman feels at the mercy of the non-locatable, unnamed violence of others, and acquires a dog to protect her, but the dog too is at her mercy, and is killed as a result of her desire to reverse her potential victimhood and become part of the unavoidable violence of human society, underscoring exposure as a fundamentally creaturely experience in Bernhard's work. In her concentration camp memoir, Austrian writer Ruth Klüger also reflects on 'ausgeliefert sein' as the foundational experience of victimhood: 'innerhalb des Lagers war man mit Haut und Haar einem anonymen Willen ausgeliefert, durch

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<sup>260</sup> Long, *Ibid.*

<sup>261</sup> Thomas Bernhard, *Der Atem*, p.47,74,105,108.

<sup>262</sup> Thomas Bernhard, 'Ausgeliefert' in *Werke 14* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), p.275: 'she now had everything to fear' / 'she had given herself over to the human'.

den man jederzeit in ein unklar wahrgenommenes Schreckenslager weiter verschickt werden konnte.<sup>263</sup> These insights permit us to nuance Damerau's judgment of Bernhard as 'Autor der literarischen Körper-Formen, Autor einer Literatur als Körper-Ereignis'<sup>264</sup> because, *Frost* reveals how a creaturely, embodied exposure to a deeply entrapping exercise of power and violence points to an emphasis of passivity and victimhood in Bernhard's work.

### **Austrians as *Homines Sacri***

For Santner, this helpless exposure forms the crux of creaturely life:

an ongoing and passionate subjection not to a Creator, God or even a sovereign whose legitimacy is figured on the model of the creator but to an agency, a master's discourse, that has been attenuated and dispersed across a field of relays and points of contact that no longer cohere, even in fantasy as a consistent "other" of possible address and redress.<sup>265</sup>

In other words, creatureliness is a form of entrapment within the political realm which impacts upon the human body, and blurring its boundaries with the animal body as an index of the experience of exposure to biopolitical forces as we saw in *Cristo*. In Agamben's conception of the creaturely, creatureliness is a mark of the traumatic banishment of the *homo sacer*, the emblem of what he calls 'bare life' or *zoë* (as opposed to *bios*, the political man of life within the bounds of citizenship) in his pithy definition: '*la nuda vita: la creatura umana*.'<sup>266</sup> Bare life, characterised by Agamben in the *Homo Sacer*, is a type of life that is vulnerable to be killed but cannot enter meaningfully into the life of the community through the ritual of sacrifice: 'the life of Homo Sacer, who may be killed and yet not sacrificed.'<sup>267</sup> In other words, it is a type of existence that is not protected by the law, and therefore exposed to exclusion and violence that in Agamben's view is exercised by means of the nameless principle of sovereignty. The dominance of the abattoir motif – mentioned seventeen times in *Frost* – indicates Bernhard's diagnosis of the victimised, and yet still victimising, and exposed

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<sup>263</sup> Ruth Klüger, *weiter leben: Eine Jugend* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1992), p.86: 'Inside the camp were totally at the mercy of an anonymous will, in whose accordance any of us could have been sent on to an ambiguously perceived camp of horror at any moment.'

<sup>264</sup> Burghard Damerau, 'Geistesdämmerung und Körperkult. Inhalt und Form in Bernhards Werk' in *Thomas Bernhard: Die Zurichtung des Menschen*, ed. by Alexander Honold, Markus Josh (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1999), pp.175-187, p.186: 'An author of literary bodily forms, an author of a literature as body-event.'

<sup>265</sup> Santner, p.22. Though as I will argue in later chapters, the notion of Creator and sovereign are crucial to the experience of the reverberations of a toxic historical legacy as one of traumatic creatureliness.

<sup>266</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Mezzi senza fine* (Milano: Bollati, 1996), p.24: 'bare life: the human creature'

<sup>267</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, tr. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p.8.

condition of humanity in the post-war Austrian political landscape. An abattoir smell lingers over the village (142); Strauch states elsewhere ‘die einzige Wahrheit ist die Schlachthauswahrheit’ (215); the cold symbolising the ambient violence and inimity of the landscape draws them together ‘wie das Vieh im Stall’ (208).

In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben sees the ‘original political relation’ as ‘state of exception, as zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion’; this ‘calls into question every theory of the contractual origin of state power, and along with it, every attempt to ground political communities in something like a “belonging.”’<sup>268</sup> Strauch highlights the subjection of the individual to the vagaries of the world by explicitly defining Austrian political reality as an ‘Ausnahmezustand’ by lamenting ‘dieser ungeheuere Ausnahmezustand, müssen Sie wissen, diese Synthese der Weltverworfenheit und der Weltverrücktheit, in die sie plötzlich hereinversetzt sind’ (227).<sup>269</sup> Thus, where civic belonging is arbitrary and political relations are ruled by the indeterminacy of inclusion or exclusion, characterised by Agamben as ‘state of exception’, the Italian philosopher depicts all of humanity in modernity as ‘virtually *homines sacri*’, exposed as ‘bare life’ or ‘human creatures’, thus potential victims of the exclusionary violence of politics.<sup>270</sup> While Agamben’s concept of the *homo sacer* has been widely critiqued, most notably by LaCapra and Butler, it nonetheless remains a productive theoretical concept to explore the linkage between embodied exposure and vulnerability to a nameless political order obliterating human agency, and victimising its passive subjects in the way Strauch portrays postwar existence in *Frost*.<sup>271</sup>

## Reconstruction and myths of national identity

Just as the people of Weng lacked the sufficient historical consciousness to be anything other than passive to the violence that overwhelmed them in times of war, they are equally crushed by the political and economic machines that have taken over their lives. In *Frost*

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<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, p.181.

<sup>269</sup> ‘This awful state of exception, you know, this synthesis of rejection by the world and alienation from the world, in which you suddenly find yourself.’ (tr. Hoffmann, p.289)

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, p.115. The ‘virtually’ suggests a potential to become ‘bare life’ through the biopolitical sovereignty exercised by the law.

<sup>271</sup> Butler critiques Agamben’s lack of distinction between different modes of sovereignty and his generalisation of the exposure of the subject to political sovereignty. See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006), p.60-67. Dominick LaCapra criticises the lack of historical specificity of Agamben’s theories which are in his view guilty of a ‘blank, utopic postapocalypticism’, *History and its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), p.167.

Bernhard expresses a fundamental scepticism toward the post-war urge for economic and political reconstruction, whose optimism masked another form of tyranny:

Die Konsensbereitschaft, doch über alles Elend hinweg den Weg zu einem positiv verstandenen und von der Natur garantierten Ziel anzuerkennen, war, als *Frost* erschien, noch da, allenthalben da, und sie vertrug sich auch mit dem uns heute schon unverständlichen Optimismus, der im Ausbau der Straßen und Atomenergie tatsächlich die Garantie einer gesicherten Zukunft sah.<sup>272</sup>

The progress of a country's economic wellbeing through rationalised systems of production paradoxically seems to justify the inhumanity of this industrialisation: "‘Je mehr Kraftwerke entstehen, desto glücklicher wird unser Land sein.’ Darüber waren alle einig. Nur der Maler schwieg' (78).<sup>273</sup> Thus, Bernhard is reacting to what Pfabigan has called 'die Mitscherliche Manie des Wiederaufbaus' in *Frost* by critiquing the cover-up of the recent past in the name of economic reconstruction.<sup>274</sup> Harrison, in contrast to what the majority of critics have called 'the relentless disengagement of Bernhard's intellectual protagonists' asserts that the economy is an 'important and determining presence' in his work, and one that I argue dramatises the divorce between the individual and the structures that pressure rural Austrian life in *Frost*.<sup>275</sup>

The landscape of Weng is dominated by the construction of a new power plant which contributes to the misery of the workers but serves a political as well as economic function according to the engineer overseeing the development: 'Schon jetzt trafen jeden Tag Experten aus der ganzen Welt ein, um einen Einblick in den Bau zu gewinnen [...] "Das Kraftwerk wird alle Länder Europas Strom liefern. Eine Laie kann sich ja ein Bauwerk wie das Kraftwerk gar nicht vorstellen."' (76).<sup>276</sup> Just as the layperson cannot conceive of the power plant, the

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<sup>272</sup> Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, *Bruchlinien* (Salzburg: Residenz, 1995), p.187: 'The readiness to concede a way towards a positively understood and naturally guaranteed aim to overcome suffering was still there upon Frost's publication, and it also carried with it an optimism that is already incomprehensible to us today, namely that an assured future lay in the development of street infrastructure and atomic energy.'

<sup>273</sup> "‘The more power stations we have, the happier the country will be’. Everyone agreed. Only the painter remained silent.'

<sup>274</sup> Alfred Pfabigan, 'Frost als zeitgeschichtliche Quelle' in Benay and Behar, pp.75-90, p.87: 'The Mitscherlichian mania of reconstruction.' Alexander and Margarethe Mitscherlich published their groundbreaking *The Inability to Mourn* in 1967 which diagnosed the Germany's inability to come to terms with its past, opting instead for a repressive urge toward reconstruction.

<sup>275</sup> Russell Harrison, *Thomas Bernhard's Comic Materialism* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2012), p.91,87.

<sup>276</sup> 'Already experts from the whole world were arriving to gain an insight into the construction work [...] the power plant will supply electricity to every country in Europe. A layperson can simply not conceive of a project such as the power plant.'

thousands of workers are alienated from the political and economic goals it represents. Thus the economic impact of reconstruction in Weng is not felt by its inhabitants:

Draußen, da, wo die Welt gegeneinander rennt, da ist der Wohlstand. Hier aber ist gar kein Wohlstand. In dieses Tal kann der Wohlstand nicht herein. [...] Die Felswände versperren ihm den Weg. [...] Hier ist Arbeit und Armut und sonst nichts. (129)<sup>277</sup>

Bernhard's representation of the abject conditions of the alienated proletariat in modernity contrasts with the optimism of the construction engineer and the enthusiasm of foreign admirers of this feat of scientific architecture: 'Hier ist Aufhängen und In-Den-Fluß-Springen. [...] Mit vierzig sind diese Männer ruiniert' (129).<sup>278</sup> The pressure exerted by economic sovereignty over the human body emerges in the the painter's conversation with the engineer about the dams and power plants being built all over the country. After mentioning the floods and landslides caused by these projects, the engineer states that the collateral damage to human beings is not his main concern: 'Dammbrüche sind so selten und die Verluste dadurch, an Menschen meine ich, meistens so gering, dass das nicht ins Gewicht fällt' (78).<sup>279</sup>

Political as well as economic entrapment characterises the life of Weng's inhabitants through Bernhard's description of Austria at the frontier of two political models which places the text in the landscape of Cold War rivalries with frequent mentions to Moscow and Communism punctuating the text. Austria's enormous geostrategic importance in Cold War politics is inscribed into the landscape of Weng as the night is described as falling like 'an iron curtain', 'wie wenn auf Kommando ein riesiger eiserner Vorhang heruntergelassen würde, die eine Hälfte der Welt abtrennend von der Andern, durch und durch' (11).<sup>280</sup> Though America is never mentioned in the novel, despite the fact that Pongau region was under American occupation until 1955, the Marshall Plan and Western foreign investment make the projects in Weng possible, with the USSR maintaining a threatening and ubiquitous presence behind the scenes: 'Und Moskau steht und wacht dahinter und steht und wacht immer und überall' (178: 'And Moscow stands and watches behind the scenes and stands and watches always and everywhere'). Depicted as being on the frontline of the two dominant political super-powers,

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<sup>277</sup> 'Outside, where the world collides with itself, there's welfare. Here there's no welfare. Welfare can't get into this valley [...] the cliffs block its path [...] Here is work and poverty and nothing besides.' (tr. Hoffmann, pp.163-4).

<sup>278</sup> 'Here they hang themselves and jump in the river. [...] At forty these men are ruined.'

<sup>279</sup> 'Dam breaches are so rare and the ensuing losses, human losses I mean, are so minute, that that does not come into consideration.'

<sup>280</sup> 'as though an enormous iron curtain was lowered on queue, which split one half of the world from the other, through and through.'

the Austrian state is ridiculed throughout *Frost*, as a ‘kleiner piepsender Rhesusaffe [...] Alles lächerliche, gemeine, gemeingefährliche Piepserei [...] das Bordello Europas mit einem ausgezeichneten überseeischen Ruf’ (224-5).<sup>281</sup> While many critiques have understood these tirades as an invective against Austria’s faults as a nation, I see them as diminishing Austria’s role on the world stage, not only for the sake of critique, but also to enhance its lack of political clout, and insignificance in terms of the course of history as an act of exoneration through ridicule.

### **Power and gender: Disavowed complicities**

Creatureliness and primitivity embody the pressure points of this history in Bernhard visible in its material and economic reverberations. Whereas Levi’s Lucanians are paradoxically depicted as being outside of history and hopeful reminders of a possible political redemption in their resistance to statism, Weng’s inhabitants are inhuman as a result of their exposure to the violence of war. Their physicality is a remainder and reminder of the recent past: ‘Sie sind alle Kronzeugen der großen Verbrechen [...] der Krieg war zu Ende als die zu denken anfangen. Sie wissen vom Krieg nichts, sie wissen nichts’ (44).<sup>282</sup> Despite not having any historical consciousness, the physicality of Weng’s inhabitants is a form of inheritance of the ambiguous crimes that their bodies testify to. Indeed, the doctor’s first impressions of Weng underline the backwardness and primitivity of the mountain-dwellers

Weng ist der düsterste Ort, den ich jemals gesehen habe. [...] Tatsächlich erschreckt mich diese Gegend, die von ganz kleinen, ausgewachsenen Menschen bevölkert ist, die man ruhig schwachsinnig nennen kann. Nicht größer als ein Meter vierzig im Durchschnitt, torkeln sie zwischen Mauerritzen und Gängen, im Rausch erzeugt. Sie scheinen typisch zu sein für das Tal. (8)<sup>283</sup>

To which Strauch responds that their creaturely state is merely the symptom of a historical devastation, implying a nostalgia for what came before the ruination of the last war:

Der letzte Krieg hat die Landmenschen ruiniert! [...] Das ist ja nur mehr ein Gerümpel, das Landvolk. Erbe, Erde, was war das immer? [...] Mich stößt das Land einfach ab! [...] Für die Zukunft scheint mir

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<sup>281</sup> ‘a little twittering rhesus-ape ... the whole thing is pathetic, high-pitched, common criminal squeaking! The bordello of Europe enjoying an excellent reputation overseas.’

<sup>282</sup> ‘They are all prime witnesses of the great crimes [...] The war was over by the time they started to think. They know nothing about the war, nothing.’

<sup>283</sup> ‘Weng is the most sinister place I have ever seen. [...] Actually, this area, inhabited by really small mature adult people whom one can call cretins without a doubt, really frightened me. No taller one meter forty on average, they stagger in and out of cracks in the walls and corridors. They seem typical of this valley.’



die Landbevölkerung ohne Bedeutung. Das Land ist kein Quellbezirk mehr, nur noch eine Fundgrube für Brutalität und Schwachsinn [...] für systematisches Absterben. (128-129)<sup>284</sup>

Mobilised by the oppressive forces of poverty and economic exploitation that dominate their lives, they testify to a physical devolution in Nazi terminology: ‘Die Landmenschen, das sind ja die Untermenschen von heute! Die Untermenschen!’ (128). By contrasting an indistinct past to the present (the countryside is no longer a positive source of values; the country folk are the ‘subhumans’ of today), Strauch not only appears to be critiquing the effect of the recent past on the present state of the Austrian provinces but also suggests a suppressed nostalgia for a more harmonious past. He notes that his parents were ‘Herrenmenschen’ and refers to mysterious castles representing utopias in which communication is possible and evil is banished indicating a nostalgia for the aristocratic harmony of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy.<sup>285</sup> In an oft-quoted 1983 interview Bernhard warns: ‘Vergessen Sie auch nicht das Gewicht der Geschichte. Die Vergangenheit des Habsburgerreichs prägt uns. Bei mir ist das vielleicht sichtbarer als bei anderen. Es manifestiert sich in einer Art Hassliebe zu Österreich, sie ist letztlich auch der Schlüssel zu allem, was ich schreibe.’<sup>286</sup> Yet, this nostalgia for a bygone age of aristocratic values and social order does reveal a yearning for former kinds of inclusion and exclusionary arrangements that indirectly endorses the aristocracy of some members of society at the expense of the subhuman other embodied by the proletariat and women in *Frost*.

In an episode strikingly similar to that of Giulia’s beating in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, nowhere does Bernhard’s painter reveal his disavowed complicities in power structures (despite his assertions about his passivity) more than in his descriptions of the landlady. With her husband in prison, Weng’s landlady makes a living through the inn, by selling dogmeat to her customers obtained through her affair with the knacker and by prostituting her daughters. As such, she is an independent, self-sufficient, albeit morally dubious, woman who devotes her resources to surviving in Weng’s hostile environment; yet Strauch (who asserts to be from a family of ‘master-people’) exploits her physically referring to her as a creature: ‘sie sei ein

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<sup>284</sup> *Frost*, tr. by Michael Hoffmann, p. 164: ‘The last war has been the ruination of the country people. [...] Country people are just trash! Soil and inheritance, was that it? [...] the country is repulsive! [...] As far as the future is concerned, the rural population is without significance. The country is no source anymore, only a trove of brutality and idiocy, [...] a systematic extinction.’

<sup>285</sup> See p.193.

<sup>286</sup> Cited by Klaus Zeyringer, ‘Austrian Literature: A Concept’ in *Shadows of the Past: Austrian Literature in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Hans Schulte and Gerard Chapple (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), pp.1-37, p.7: ‘Do not forget the weight of history. The Habsburg past shapes us. This is perhaps more visible with me than with others. It manifests itself in a type of love-hate for Austria which the key to everything I write.’

Geschöpf, dass sich schlagen lässt, sich verkriecht, und dann wieder herauskommt, als ob nichts gewesen wäre. [...] Sie genügte ihm auch für sogenannte Körperansprüche. Sie habe in ihm doch immer nur den Herren gesehen' (55).<sup>287</sup> While Strauch states elsewhere that the woman is afraid of her husband returning from prison and therefore must apprehend physical violence, this episode shows that his entitlement to dominate her stems from her class inferiority, expressed in creaturely terms: 'Ihr Wissen beruht auf einer niedrigen Selbsttäuschung [...] es ist dasselbe wie bei Katze und Hund. Nur verweichlichter' (54).<sup>288</sup> In his ambiguous critique and simultaneous perpetuation of the state of contemporary Austria, Strauch himself serves as an indictment to contemporary Austria as the juxtaposition of different narrative modes and voices wield discomfiting investments in a gendered discourse of political hegemony in parallel with critique and impeachment.

### **The distortions of humanitarianism and the failure of humanism**

Andreas Gössling argues that war in Bernhard's *oeuvre* is 'eine drastische Manifestation des Geistes der Moderne, der durch Reduktion und Verselbstständigung zu eindimensionalem Verstand sich selber und alles Lebendige, Individuelle liquidiert.'<sup>289</sup> To this we can add the depiction of the primacy of economic and political interests over the existential and physical integrity of the individual human being. As we saw in *Cristo*, *Frost* also deploys a creaturely idiom to crystallise the dehumanising impact of state and economic sovereignty. In the final section of this chapter, I will examine Bernhard's critique of scientific and philosophical humanism by targeting the discourses and disciplines that have come to police notions of 'humanity' and 'humanism' to violent and exclusionary effects.

Strauch reveals himself to have some hope in the notion of humanity which resists the explanatory frameworks of written discourse: 'Der Maler sagt, es ist alles unverständlich, weil menschlich, und die Welt ist unmenschlich, also verständlich alles und tieftraurig' (108).<sup>290</sup> To explain is to dehumanise, and therefore all explanatory frameworks are inhumane, and will only be untrue if they try to capture the human. In this vein, the doctor's depiction of the painter – although marked by horror at his physical condition – is marked by a deep sympathy for his

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<sup>287</sup> 'She was a creature, that allowed itself to be beaten, crept away and then crawled out again, as if nothing had happened. [...] She sufficed to satisfy what he called his bodily demands, but she had always only seen him as a master.'

<sup>288</sup> 'Her knowledge is based on a base self-deception ... it is the same as that of a cat or dog, only meeker'

<sup>289</sup> Gössling, p.140: 'a drastic manifestation of the spirit of modernity, which through reduction and self-alienation liquidates itself and every other individual living thing to one dimension.'

<sup>290</sup> 'The painter says, everything is incomprehensible because it is human, and the world is inhuman, and everything in it is understandable and deeply sad.'

suffering which he can engage with on a non-discursive level: ‘Ich vergesse ganz wozu ich da bin. Daß ich meine Beobachtungen zu machen habe [...] alles nur Erscheinungen, die man ja nicht ordnen kann. [...] Nein ich bin sicher nicht fähig zwei, drei zusammenhängende Worte zu sagen. Obwohl ja Klarheit herrscht. [...] Kein Aufgeschriebenes stimmt. [...] Falsch. Anders. Unwahr also’ (107-108).<sup>291</sup> Thus the medical discourse that the doctor had previously had such faith in and seeks make the human comprehensible (and therefore ‘unmenschlich’ in Strauch’s terms) fails; on the one hand, this is a pessimistic account of the incapacity to truly know or explain anything; on the other, it retrieves a non-reducible idea of humanity from the dehumanising discourses that continually contains it. Medicine, like economic and political progress, belongs to humanist discourses that no longer frame post-war experience. Marked by alienation, entropy and dehumanisation, the human body becomes the symptom of the inapplicability of humanist ideas that were so crucial to Carlo Levi’s depiction of the Lucanians. Paola Bozzi maintains that Bernhard still believes in the value of ‘the humanistic tradition of the search for meaning, he remains an interpreter of the world always keenly aware that the artist can create nothing but lies and deceit.’<sup>292</sup> Unlike Levi’s unproblematising authoritative representation of the plight of the Lucanians, Thomas Bernhard’s narrator fails to believe in the coherence of his narrative project.

Firstly, the trainee doctor who has been sent to Weng by his superior to comment on Strauch’s life and behaviour is forced to reassess the humanist foundations of his medical training. Confronted by Strauch’s complete disregard for any of his medical opinions, and the omnipresence of disease and entropy in the mountainous landscape, the young doctor recalls a sentence from his training: ‘Der Arzt ist der Helfer der Menschheit’ (75: ‘the doctor is the helper of humanity’). The absurdity of this phrase which was previously a cornerstone of his medical education plunges him into pain and despair: ‘Der Helfer der Menschheit durchkreuzte mein Gehirn und verursachte mir zum ersten Mal nach langer Zeit Kopfschmerzen. Mir is alles unverständlich’ (75: ‘the helper of humanity stayed on my mind and gave me headaches for the first time in a long while. Everything is incomprehensible to me.’). The humanist framework of his medical training is further undermined when he has a dream of encountering thousands of deferential patients ‘die sich vor mir verneigten, sie drückten merkwürdigerweise

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<sup>291</sup> ‘I completely forget why I am here. That I need to make my observations. [...] Everything is only an apparition that cannot be categorised [...] No, I am certainly not capable of stringing two or three words together. Though really everthing is perfectly clear. [...] Nothing written down is correct. False. Different. Untrue, basically.’

<sup>292</sup> Paola Bozzi, ‘Homeland, Death and Otherness in Thomas Bernhard’s Early Lyrical Work’ in *A companion to the works of Thomas Bernhard*, ed. by Matthias Konzett (London: Camden House, 2002), pp.71-83, p.83.

ihre Köpfe ganz auf dem Boden herunter' (84: 'they bow down before me, they oddly pressed their heads right down onto the ground') before performing an operation on Strauch. Despite his emphasis on procedure and rigour in his description of the operation, the trainee's surgical interventions in fact contribute to the fragmentation and dehumanisation of the human body. Far from being 'ein Helfer der Menschheit' the doctor's work makes the patient's body unrecognizable as human, until it is simply described as a piece of flesh: 'Der Körper war überhaupt nicht mehr als Körper erkennbar. Es war wie ein Fleisch, das ich folgerichtig, tadellos aber vollkommen verrückt zerschnitten hatte' (85).<sup>293</sup> While the doctors congratulate him on his surgical achievement ('die größte Leistung auf medizinisch-operativem Gebiet' / 'the greatest achievement in the field of surgery', 85), the trainee notes with horror how his patient is now nothing more than a jittering lump of bloody flesh. Medicine has destroyed the humanity of the patient, rather than restored his integrity:

ich [sah] [...] auf einen Haufen vollkommen verstümmelten Fleisches, das sich unter elektrischen Stößen zu bewegen schien, zu zucken schien, einen Haufen völlig zerstückelten Fleisches, das schlagweise Blut ausstieß [...] und langsam alles in Blut ertränkte, alles, die Ärzteschaft, alles (86).<sup>294</sup>

The lack of empathy for the sick and the doctors' emphasis on procedure makes the intern realise what an inhuman profession he has entered where 'helping humanity' is merely a euphemism for perpetuating violence on bodies.

Underpinning this physical degradation of the human through medicine is the failure of anthropocentric philosophical discourse ('mit der Philosophie komme man keinen Schritt weiter', 68). His schooling is described as the senseless praise of 'die Errungenschaften Voltaires' complimented by 'Umrissen Homers ... hereingebrochen in mein Hirn, in Finsternis, zusammenhanglos Ursachen und Erscheinungen' (62). By referring to Voltaire, Strauch is alluding to the European Enlightenment whose mission it was, according to Kant, to inspire all every human being 'sich aus der ihm beinahe zur Natur gewordenen Unmündigkeit herauszuarbeiten' in the name of progress and political equality. Kant exhorts readers, envisaged as 'das Menschengeschlecht' to 'dare to know' ('Sapere Aude! Habe Mut, dich

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<sup>293</sup> 'The body was no longer recognisable as a body. It was like a piece of meat, that I had procedurally, immaculately but completely manically cut to pieces.'

<sup>294</sup> 'I was looking at a completely mutilated pile of flesh, that seemed to be jittering as though through electric shocks, a pile of completely maimed flesh, from which blood poured out jerkily [...] and slowly everything drowned in blood, everything, the doctors, everything.'

deines eigenen Verstandes zu bedienen!') whereby man's reason is validated as an act of individual agency.<sup>295</sup> However, Voltaire and Homer, cornerstones of the classical humanist education, have not enlightened Strauch, but only plunged him further into despair. Indeed, the word 'philosophisch' is parodied in a later sentence to signify the primacy of the body over the mind in Strauch's description of his disease 'eine Krankheit, die sich [...] geradezu philosophisch ausbreitet' (69), likening the mental enlargement supposedly afforded by philosophy to a cancerous spread of illness and decay.

In the fissure between humanist discourses and humanity itself, Bernhard's text displays a concern for the vestiges of humanity that survive the creaturely entropy of Weng in an attempt to instigate some form of fellow feeling through the depiction of suffering. While Bernhard's text relies too much on postmodern, competing narrative voices to class as a neorealist work defined by Bazin as the antitheatrical work of a unified consciousness: 'it is always reality as it is visible by an artist, [...] but through his consciousness as a whole and not by his reason alone or by his emotions and beliefs.'<sup>296</sup> Yet, I agree with Schmidt-Dengler who asserts that Bernhard 'hat am meisten in unsere Lebenswirklichkeit eingegriffen' as a 'Diagnostiker österreichischer Befindlichkeit', and with Beer who asserts the visceral realness of Bernhard's writing, despite its highly literary and philosophical import: 'Nicht Abstraktion wird hier abgehandelt [...] sondern pulsierendes Leben, ein Stück zuckender Wirklichkeit.'<sup>297</sup> Indeed, both by its creaturely dimension revealing an entrapping passivity of the individual to the more powerful forces of state and economy, *Frost* depicts what Bazin has called 'the biological narrative' of neorealism, underpinned by the exposure of the individual.<sup>298</sup> As in *Cristo*, it can be argued that *Frost* presents the same link between charitable intentions and the

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295 Immanuel Kant, 'Beantwortung auf der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?' in *Werke in sechs Bänden*, Vol.6, ed. by Wilhelm Wieschedel (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1964), pp.53,54,61: 'Thus when nature has unwrapped, from under this hard shell, the seed for which she cares most tenderly, namely the propensity and calling to think freely, the latter gradually works back upon the mentality of the people (which thereby gradually becomes capable of freedom in acting) and eventually even upon the principles of government, which finds it profitable to itself to treat the human being, who is now more than a machine, in keeping with his dignity.' <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/kant/enlightenment.htm> (Last Accessed: 12/04/2014).

<sup>296</sup> André Bazin, 'In Defense of Rossellini' in *André Bazin and Neorealism*, ed. by Bert Cardullo (New York : Continuum, 2011) , pp.163-172, pp.167-168.

<sup>297</sup> Schmidt-Dengler, p.173: 'Bernhard is the author who has delved into the reality of our lives the most' as a 'diagnostician of Austrian sensitivity'; Otto F. Beer, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 1963. Cited by Bernhard Judex, *Thomas Bernhard: Epoche, Werk, Wirkung* (München: Beck, 2010), p.53: 'Abstraction is not dealt with here but rather pulsating life, a piece of twitching reality.'

<sup>298</sup> Cited by Cardullo, p.18.

spectacular presentation of suffering, outlined by Karl Schoonover's theory of 'brutal humanism' in neorealist cinema.

By emphasising the charitable imperative upon the sight of suffering, Bernhard could be conveying some hope for the foundation of positive modes of social interaction. Upon seeing the railway workers working in harsh mountainous conditions the trainee immediately reacts with compassion: 'Ihnen galt sofort meine Sympathie' (5) For Strauch too, a notion of humanity is mobilised at the sight of economic exploitation, as despite his tirades against the inhabitants of Weng, he cannot help reacting sympathetically to the spectacle of human suffering and debased embodiment in Weng as a result of the exploitation of the work force for the sake of economy: "'Man fragt sich ja, ob das eigentlich Menschen sind'", sagte er, "die da oft um fünf vor zwölf daherhinken, in eine Hütte hineinhinken, oder in die Kantine, in das Gasthaus"'(177).<sup>299</sup> As Markolin notes in the context of Bernhard's prose *oeuvre*:

[He] has recreated with supreme artistic ingenuity the suffering human being, whose futile quest for insight has completely exhausted and isolated him. Compassion and concern for the earth and its creatures trigger powerful tirades in which Bernhard ruthlessly denounces those who spread human suffering, and in which Austria is a comic and grotesque metaphor for the wretchedness of human existence.<sup>300</sup>

Yet Strauch laments the 'reconstructive' and future oriented investment of goodwill co-opted into political and economic discourses that emphasise reconstruction over humanitarian imperatives. For instance, 'Ein junger Mensch mit einem krummen Fuß erregt uns Mitleid [...] ein alter Mensch mit einem krummen Fuß aber erregt nur unseren Ekel' (173).<sup>301</sup> Aware that all charitable impulses are governed by the underlying belief in an investment in the future, Bernhard represents the elderly person as an investment without return thereby juxtaposing human finitude and a hopeless of political and physical renewal emphasised by Strauch's peremptory 'die Wirklichkeit hat kein Mitgefühl'(123: 'reality has no sympathy'). For instance, Strauch donates to the local shelter in response to the overwhelming poverty he witnesses in Weng. In a discussion with the Mother Superior he notices a man who appears to be dead but is in fact deaf and immobile, lying there 'wie ein Hund' (90), 'und da atmete das Stück Holz'

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<sup>299</sup> "'One asks oneself, whether they are actually human beings,'" he said, "who often hobble up there at five to twelve, limp into a hut, or into the cantine, the inn."

<sup>300</sup> Caroline Markolin, 'Too late to seek, too early to find?' in *Shadows of the Past: Austrian Literature of the Twentieth Century* ed. by Hans H. Schulte, Gerard Schapple (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), pp.125-139, p.127.

<sup>301</sup> 'A young person with a club foot arouses pity in us, [...] an old man with a club foot only arouses our disgust.'

(89) provoking horror and hysterical laughter on the part of the observer as the Mother Superior tells him that the funds he contributes are in fact ‘den Armen im Kongo zugute’ (88). The breakdown of compassion at the sight of suffering is also noted by the Famulant, who appeals to his superior’s brotherly feeling towards the painter, blaming his condition on the Assistant’s neglect and violence (‘er war schon als Kind attackiert und zwar von Ihnen’, 257): ‘ich möchte sagen: erhören Sie ihr Bruder!’ (256: ‘I would like to say, heed to your brother!’). In this light, it is possible to argue that the narrator has relayed the entire narrative to the reader, despite the unreliability of his subject position, by describing the painter in a creaturely and dehumanised light as ‘unmenschlich menschlich’ (225) in an attempt to achieve some remorse from the Assistant and milden his violent tendencies – a small attempt to evoke some tenderness for what neorealist theorist André Bazin called the ‘human fauna’ of postwar life.<sup>302</sup>

While the text did not have the same explosive sociological impact in Austria as Levi’s text did in Italy: ‘als “Frost” erschien, ist es ja hier sowieso völlig abgelehnt worden,’<sup>303</sup> aspects of it radically counter the prevalent view of Bernhard as a misanthrope.<sup>304</sup> In Konzett’s view, ‘the challenge for Bernhard, [...] lies in evoking a visceral and moral response on the part of the reader/viewer to overcome the position of the bystander.’<sup>305</sup> However, the fragmented human and animal body does not evoke a proactive, charitable compassion on the part of the painter, but rather a hopeless despair that charitable or compassionate interventions have no impact of the restoration of human dignity. The trainee doctor never receives a reply, the workers continue to toil in the power plant, Strauch dies of exposure. Bernhard’s discussion of charitable compassion in *Frost* only inscribes the body more firmly into creaturely relationships defined by economic sovereignty (as we see with the undead homeless man, likened to a piece of wood) and testify to the inherent violence undermining communitarian relationships in Austria (reflected in the cold rationality of Strauch’s brother’s indifference to his brother’s mental illness).

Thus, Bernhard draws together creaturely life, the vulnerability to violence and the incapacity to act or bear witness, demonstrating a problematic investment in the notion of victimhood and the meaninglessness of political agency and historical consciousness.

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<sup>302</sup> André Bazin, ‘Vittorio de Sica: Metteur en Scène’ in Cardullo, pp.74-89, p.81.

<sup>303</sup> Hofmann, p.50.

<sup>304</sup> Richard Tschapke, ‘Kalte Wut im Schatten des Todes, T.B. Alpendichter und Menschenfeind: Abschied von einem negativen Idylliker’, *Rheinischer Merkur* 24.2.1989. Cited in Oliver Bentz, *Thomas Bernhard: Dichtung als Skandal* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2000), p.6.

<sup>305</sup> Matthias Konzett, ‘Introduction: Thomas Bernhard and the Avant-Garde’ in *A Companion to the Works of Thomas Bernhard* (2002), pp.1-22, p.13.

Furthermore, as the painter and the first-person narrator compete for narrative authority, the continual deferral and slippages of narrative positions undermine the possibility of witnessing, foreclosing a sustained debate about Austria's history in specific terms. As Sebald has noted, Thomas Bernhard's narrator's lack of knowledge serves to muddy the waters of epistemological knowledge and contribute to the very subterfuge that Bernhard perceives to be at work in Austrian society as a whole: 'everything that the narrator relates is mediated through one or two other stages, which makes for quite complicated labyrinthine syntactical structures, and in one sense exonerates the narrator, because he never pretends to know more than is actually possible.'<sup>306</sup> The narrator is not a direct witness to the past, but rather arranges the acts of witnessing he is party to, and falls prey to the confusion caused by the dominant and often illogical voice of the overwhelming protagonist. In this sense, *Frost* stages a successful problematisation of the spuriousness of dominant narratives and the obfuscation propagated by authoritarian narrators and demagogues. While this kaleidoscopic, unreliable narrative position may never be untangled, Bernhard nevertheless points to the spectral remainders of a history that cannot be ignored – it is an ulcer about to burst, voices screaming for attention or the incessant barking of dogs we hear throughout the text: The crimes are there, says Strauch, 'auch wenn das alles vom Schnee zugedeckt ist, sagte er, Hunderte und Tausende Geschwüre, die dauernd aufgehen. Stimmen, die fortwährend schreien' (36).<sup>307</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter has teased out questions surrounding historical consciousness, the investment in a notion of human agency and the use of animal semantics to gauge attitudes and anxieties in the evaluation of the legacy of fascist statehood and the Second World War. Thus, by comparing Bernhard and Levi's treatments of creaturely experiences in rural Hinterländer, remote from, but exposed to the vagaries of world politics, the crushing influence of a dehumanising history comes to light on the one hand, as well as the narrators' discomfiting gendered, political and economic complicities in the oppression and victimisation of the creature on the other. The depiction of creaturely human beings relies on a semantics of the animal demonstrating an urgent need to engage with the nature of humanity in the aftermath of the Second World War. The creaturely not only articulates a crisis in the integrity of the human

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<sup>306</sup> James Wood, 'Interview with W.G. Sebald', *Brick*, pp.26-29, p.29; quoted by Todd Samuel Presner, *Mobile Modernity: Germans, Jews, Trains* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p.282.

<sup>307</sup> 'even if everything is buried in snow. Hundreds and thousands of ulcers continuously swelling. Voices screaming incessantly.'



being in contact with a toxic historical legacy, but, firstly, portrays an investment in the paralytic stasis of traumatic exposure which inhibits resistance and agency and therefore entrenches the victim position through the insistence on creaturely divestiture. Secondly, the neorealist focus on the suffering proletarian body in the context of potential economic recovery and political reform galvanizes compassion to real political effect in the case of *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, but is also wrapped up in contaminated discourses of reconstruction and futurity in *Frost*. As this chapter has demonstrated, the creaturely is a theoretical node which problematises discourses of victimhood in Austria and Italy, as well as underlining investments in political passivity, economic subalternity and posturing self-abasement for the sake of international exoneration and recognition. The following chapter will examine how the animal and the creaturely are two different modes of figuring historical experience in the works of Elsa Morante: to do this I will examine the notion of the creature in relation to the imagined experience of wartime, and as a mode of representation that reveals slippages in attachments to images of victimhood and deploys the language of victimisation. I will also consider the notion of habitat in relation to the creaturely struggle for survival in my first investigation of how spaces also crystallise attitudes to the past and are an index of traumatic and regressive embodiment.

## **Chapter Two: Elsa Morante's Creaturely Universe: Space, History and Animality in *La Storia***

*Und einmal waren wir auch, von der den Dingen und der Kreatur gewidmeten Aufmerksamkeit her, in die Nähe eines Offenen und Freien gelangt. Und zuletzt in die Nähe der Utopie.*<sup>308</sup>

*Il mondo intorno a noi appariva capovolto, dunque qualcuno doveva averlo capovolto, e perciò essere un capovolto lui stesso: uno, mille, un milione di esseri antiumani, creati per torcere quello che era diritto, per sporcare il pulito.*<sup>309</sup>

Giorgio Agamben describes Elsa Morante's first novel *La Storia*, published in 1974, as 'una discesa nel mondo delle creature di cui non c'è esempio nella letteratura di questo mondo.'<sup>310</sup> Agamben defines his concept of the creaturely in religious terms as the living testimony of God's creation: 'chiamo creatura tutto ciò che è, naturalmente e senza sforzo in Dio e che, prima che la peste borghese lo distruggesse, si può dire che ogni autentico popolo è naturalmente in Dio.' He continues 'io credo che questa dimensione ci sia stata tolta come possibilità di salvezza e di conoscenza perché noi l'abbiamo distrutta, fuori di noi, ma anche, in primo luogo, dentro di noi.'<sup>311</sup> Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that 'la via delle creature' is no longer a legitimate ('lecito') place to search for God; God, he states, must be reached without appealing to the creature's innocence; as such, the creature becomes a symbol of the fall of man in a fractured world whose history has foreclosed the redemptive potential of the creature which Benjamin had proposed in his Kafka text as the symbol of the messiah who would redeem the world making only a 'slight adjustment' to its creatural incarnation.<sup>312</sup> Agamben's provocative analysis of *La Storia* underlines how the novel dramatizes the historically conditioned fissure between the creature and its creator, a result of the biopolitical shift represented by a history that has ruptured man's potential for redemption. Agamben's

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<sup>308</sup> Paul Celan, 'Der Meridian', *Gesammelte Werke III*, ed. by Bodo Allemann, Stefan Reichert, Rolf Bücher (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2000), pp.187-202, p.200. Paul Celan, 'Meridian' in *Selections*, ed. by Pierre Joris (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp.154-176, p.167: 'And once by dint of attention to things and beings, we came close to a free and open space. And finally, close to utopia.'

<sup>309</sup> Primo Levi, *L'ultimo Natale di Guerra* (Turin: Einaudi, 2002), p.31.

<sup>310</sup> Giorgio Agamben, 1 October 1974 in *L'amata: Lettere di o a Elsa Morante* (Turin: Einaudi, 2012), pp.515-516, p.516.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>312</sup> 'This little man is at home in distorted life; he will disappear with the coming of the Messiah, of whom a great rabbi once said that he did not wish to change the world by force but would only make a slight adjustment in it.' Walter Benjamin, 'Franz Kafka: On the tenth anniversary of his death' in *Ibid. Illuminations*, tr. Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 2009), pp.108-135(p.129-130).

letter encompasses a central tension in Elsa Morante's work which I will examine in her historical novel *La Storia* (1974), namely that of her moral investment in the vulnerability of the human and animal creature and the problem of agency in her vision of a disempowered universe of creatures in thrall of historical victimisation and impossible redemption. The two quotations that open this chapter also define the central preoccupations of Morante's work: the redemptive potential of an attention to 'things and creatures' which are located within space that Celan evokes in his Meridian essay, offset by the destructive power of a faceless, ineluctable and entropic force that Morante calls 'History'. *La Storia* engages in an investment in the figure of the creature as a symbol of the loss of innocence and violence of victimisation in wartime, making Morante's work extremely productive for the two parallel and often mutually-enforcing avenues this thesis investigates, namely how embodiment correlates with an elaboration of Italian national identity.

Elsa Morante's 1974 novel *La Storia* is an indictment of what she calls the scandal of history – 'uno scandalo che dura da diecimila anni'<sup>313</sup> – and thematises a fundamental imbalance within society and history, namely 'il principio immobile della dinamica storia: agli uni il potere, agli altri la schiavitù.'<sup>314</sup> In the novel, a widowed schoolteacher, Ida Ramundo, struggles for survival in Rome with her children from the outbreak of the Second World War in Italy in 1941 until 1947. She is raped by a German soldier and has a son, Useppe, who is a figure of supreme innocence and joy among the horrors of wartime which slowly chip away at Ida's sanity. *La Storia* documents Ida's struggle to guarantee her child's survival against the odds in a city under assault by the Nazis, the Allies and the Fascists. No matter the poverty of the family's living conditions, little Useppe stands out because of his continual amazement at what he perceives to be the beauty and excitement of the world around him. The novel ends when he succumbs to his epilepsy, which causes Ida to have a mental breakdown: such an ending is portrayed as a world-historical conspiracy against those who have no power at a structural level – 'Tutta la Storia e le nazioni della terra s'erano concordate a questa fine: la strage del bambino Useppe Ramundo' (648). The structure of the novel, which is broadly split into chronological yearly sections, is interrupted by a paratext which gives an overview of the given year's historical facts (e.g. '1924-1925: In Russia, morta di Lenin', 9) which occur alongside the Ramundo family's decline. These sections show a heavy emotional investment in the violence they list; Hitler is described as 'un ossesso sventurato, e invaso dal vizio della

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<sup>313</sup> Elsa Morante, *La Storia: uno scandalo che dura da diecimila anni* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), front matter.

<sup>314</sup> Elsa Morante, *La Storia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1995), p.7. All references within the text.

morte' and Nazism is seen to authorise the German people 'in pratica al libero genocidio degli Ebrei' (9,10). In Garboli's perceptive analysis of *La Storia* he notes that the novel is structured impressionistically, according to the material urgencies of survival of its characters, highlighting their exposure and struggle for life before their eventual demise. The plot takes place at the level of the creatural, for Garboli, a device I will examine in detail throughout this chapter: 'la trama, il plot, l'intreccio non esistono. A spingere l'azione della storia è la più bassa delle condizioni suscettibili di essere romanzate, la più terra-terra, la più animale: la fame, il bisogno di sopravvivenza. È il solo filo conduttore, insieme alla ricerca della tana.'<sup>315</sup> According to Behrens and Galle, the task of the modern novel is to act as a repository for 'das letzte und unveräusserliche Residuum menschlicher Identität, die körperliche Dimension'; in its creaturely codifications, the body can signify the complexity, multivalence, and aliveness of historical experience, evinced powerfully in *La Storia*.<sup>316</sup> Nevertheless, what does this prioritisation of the creatural in *La Storia* lose in terms of an open and productive confrontation with the circumstances of Italian participation in the Second World War?

Morante's penultimate novel suffered from its own untimeliness due to the extreme political controversy the publication of *La Storia* unleashed at a time of intense political polarisation in Italy, and Stefania Lucamante has argued that present commentators are in a less distracted position to comment on the impact of her work's 'power as a linguistic signifier encompassing all the disastrous consequences of progressive history ... [which] are better grasped now than forty year ago.'<sup>317</sup> In part, Morante is responsible for this when she labelled *La Storia* as 'un'azione politica', rather than a novel, in favour of the oppressed and against the repressive violent machinations of a monolith, agencyless, history; this intention was met vociferously by her first critics.<sup>318</sup> Traldi gathers a few British perceptions on *La Storia* on the date of its publication in translation in 1978 which designate it as a testimony to the victimisation of society's underclass by the oppressive force of history: '[The novel's] main characters are sacrificial victims whose death should prove and at the same time expiate the

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<sup>315</sup> Cesare Garboli, *Il gioco segreto* (Milan: Adelphi, 1995), p.167.

<sup>316</sup> Rudolf Behrens, Roland Galle, 'Vorwort' in *Menschengestalten: Zur Kodierung des Kreatürlichen im modernen Roman*, ed. by Rudolf Behrens, Roland Galle (Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg 1995), pp.7-10, p.9.

<sup>317</sup> Stefania Lucamante, "'The World must be the Writer's Concern': Elsa Morante's Vision of History' in *Elsa Morante's Politics of Writing: Rethinking Subjectivity, History and the Power of Art* ed. by Stefania Lucamante (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015), pp.87-104, p.89.

<sup>318</sup> Garboli, p.156.

injustices of society, of history and of anti-Semitism.’<sup>319</sup> Paolo Milano sees the characters as ‘suffocated or extinguished by history’, and Stephen Spender reads *La Storia* as a paean to the ‘poor and oppressed’ while Russell Davies criticises Morante for being unable to ‘control the themes she sets in motion’, due to the overwhelming passivity of her characters who are swept up in a historical vortex with little sense of resolution or redemption.<sup>320</sup> Criticised for its pessimistic outlook and overly detailed presentation of suffering, Morante’s wartime saga has also been accused of ‘selling misery’ by Rossana Rossanda. With its throng of working-class and semi-illiterate characters subjected to humiliation and suffering, the work diverges completely from Marxist narratives of progress and emancipation, favoured by the post-1968 left-wing Italian intelligentsia, as it marginalises the very class the left was hoping to mobilise. Rossanda, writing in the left-wing journal *Il Manifesto*, critiques Morante’s tendency to portray weak and victimised characters as the only bearers of positive value in the novel. According to Rossanda, Morante has turned the proletarian vitality evident in Pasolini’s 1955 *Ragazzi di Vita* into a state of universal victimhood and misery: ‘non riesce a concepire che un mondo di umiliati e offesi, che la povertà o complesse condizioni di emarginazione o devianza, o tracolli generazionali, o, stavolta, la Guerra e la condizione dell’ebraismo, condannano ad essere ineluttabilmente vittime.’<sup>321</sup>

Conversely, in a similar vein to Agamben’s, Calvino sees Morante’s novel as an attempt to offer a point of resistance to what Morante calls ‘l’irrealtà’ of Italy’s bourgeois society by staging a confrontation with ‘le classe popolari, dove l’irrealtà non è originaria, ma “indotta.”’<sup>322</sup> Ravello, in her 1980 monograph, de-politicises the juxtaposition of hegemonic ‘History’ and individual ‘story’ by justifying that Morante is not condemning the cruel machinations of history by opposing them with abstract values, such as the ‘good’ and the ‘natural’; instead Morante is giving an insight into an alternative vision of reality, a parallel *Weltanschauung* to the global panorama of disaster which is highlighted in the paratext: ‘*La Storia* si pone ben al di là di una generica condanna in nome dei valori astratti dell’uomo: la maggior parte del libro, infatti, è tutta dedicata alla percezione e alla descrizione di un’altra realtà, una realtà che superi quella negativa di cui dà testimonianza.’<sup>323</sup> As Morante herself

<sup>319</sup> For an overview of *La Storia*’s early critical reception, see A. Traldi, *Fascism and Fiction* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1987), p.249. Stephen Spender, ‘Melancholic and Magic History’, *New York Review of Books* 27 April 1977, pp.31-34.

<sup>320</sup> See Alberto Traldi, *Fascism and Fiction* (London: Scarecrow, 1987), p.244-247.

<sup>321</sup> Rossana Rossanda, ‘Una storia d’altri tempi’, *Il Manifesto*, 7 August 1974. p.3. *Il Manifesto*, founded by Rossanda in 1969, provided a major outlet for Italian Marxist intellectuals and its contributors were among Morante’s harshest critics.

<sup>322</sup> Cited by Cesare Garboli, ‘Pro e Contro’ in *L’Espresso*, 11 August 1974.

<sup>323</sup> Donatella Ravello, *Scrittura e Follia nei Romanzi di Elsa Morante* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1980), p.112.

noted in her collection of essays *Pro o contro la bomba atomica* (1968): 'l'arte per la sua validità propria non può fermarsi alla denuncia: vuole altro.'<sup>324</sup> As this overview of Morante's reception shows, *La Storia* immediately stirred debates about political agency and the possibility of forging a new sphere of political action centred on the marginalised. What these commentators have neglected however is the structural and literary medium Morante chooses, namely that of the creatural impact of the violence exerted at a crucial moment in Italian history, to convey this much-controversied sense of disempowerment.

Much critical literature on Morante has tended to focus on her as a woman writer or writer of motherhood, after her work was firstly strongly criticised by the feminist left which perceived it to essentialise women and confine them to traditional roles under patriarchal hegemony.<sup>325</sup> In her essay on the utopian function of Morante's narrative position in *La Storia*, Lucia Re defines the novelist's 'voce femminile' - feminine voice - as that which offers a point of resistance to hegemonic, patriarchal and universal discourse:

The "voce femminile," [...] is essentially an interrogative voice, a voice that probes, questions, remembers what was forgotten, raises doubts, shifts the focus of the master discourse, multiplies and diversifies its perspectives without, however, pretending to provide answers, definitions, positive assessments, totalizations, systematic interpretations.<sup>326</sup>

Cristina della Colletta expands on this by arguing that Morante's novel reflects the dialectic between individual, gendered stories and History writ large. Della Colletta sees *La Storia* as a transgressive heir to Manzoni's *I promessi sposi* as it questions 'the ideological, ethical and aesthetic significance of narrative discourse as a form of historical representation,'<sup>327</sup> and puts women's histories and experience at the centre of its narrative project, but Della Colletta does not reflect on the role of creatures in this aesthetic reflection. Though Morante's empowering post-modern destabilisation of hegemonic and patriarchal language is illuminated by Della Colletta and Re's studies, her vision raises questions about how to engage with a meaningful debate surrounding the possibility of historical agency at a critical juncture in the foundation of the new Italian republic in the aftermath of the Fascist

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<sup>324</sup> Elsa Morante, 'Pro o Contro la Bomba Atomica' in *Opere 2* (Milan: Mondadori, 1990), p.1545.

<sup>325</sup> For an overview of the initial negative feminist critique of Elsa Morante's *oeuvre*, see Sharon Wood 'The Bewitched Mirror: Imagination and Narration in Elsa Morante' *MLR* 86:2 (April 1991), pp.310-21; Jeuland Meynaud 'Le identificazioni della donna nella narrative di Elsa Morante' *Annali di Italianistica* 7 (1989), pp.300-24; Robin Pickering-Iazzi, 'Designing Mothers: Images of Motherhood in Novels by Aleramo, Morante, Maraini and Fallaci' in *Annali di Italianistica* 7 (1989), pp.329-33.

<sup>326</sup> Lucia Re, 'Utopian Longing and the Constraints of Sexual Difference in Elsa Morante's *La Storia*', *Italica* 70:3 (1993), pp.361-375, p.371.

<sup>327</sup> Cristina della Colletta, *Plotting the Past: Metamorphoses of Historical Fiction in Modern Italian Narrative* (Lafayette, IN: Purdue UP, 1996), p.69.

dictatorship, Nazi collaboration, and a controversial Resistance. In this sense, I critique Giuseppina Mecchia's view that Morante in *La Storia* is engaging Deleuze and Guattari's empowering concept of becoming by depicting protagonists engaging in the 'forces of the cosmos', calling for 'the disintegration of historical subjectivity in a space of impersonal contemplation and joy': for me, this view underpins the problematic investment in a deletion of historical agency and empowerment in the face of violence which pose an urgent theoretical problem in the fact of the legacy of the Second World War.<sup>328</sup> For Mecchia, what emerges is 'a positive affirmation of life itself – a *bare life* to be sure, but one that can still clothe itself in poetic language.'<sup>329</sup> Mecchia argues that Morante's characters 'stick so close to their very existence that any historical understanding of their circumstances is unthinkable'; yet, her marginalisation and ultimate death are due to an unpredictable conflation of circumstances caused by the violence of aerial warfare, racial exclusion and the disintegration of social and institutional structures in the battle for Rome.<sup>330</sup> Many problematic assertions need to be unpicked in these views, despite the undeniable philosophical validity of linking Morante's and Deleuze and Guattari's thought. How can Agamben's concept of *bare life* reconcile a productive understanding of history with an affirmation of corporeal vulnerability? If Morante's novel portrays the divorce between corporeal immediacy and historical consciousness, how can *La Storia* emerge as a meaningful engagement with the specific complexities of redefining national identity in Italy in light of the Second World War? If *La Storia* enacts a complete disavowal of the potential of the individual to engage affirmatively in their own destiny and by extension in the realms of society and history, what does this say about Morante's investment in a national myth of historical victimhood?

In the first part of this chapter, I deal with Morante's focus on animals and children to convey the experience of historical suffering in *La Storia*; thereby, I underline the fundamental difference between the animal and the creaturely and note why the expression of the creaturely passes through a reckoning with the animal to underscore the experience of dehumanisation as simultaneously degrading and messianic, an inherently problematic theoretical avenue. Scholtmeijer cautions that 'as soon as language begins to articulate the vital inner experience of animals, the suspicion arises that culture is learning more about itself than about animals per

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<sup>328</sup> Giuseppina Mecchia, 'Elsa Morante at the biopolitical Turn: Becoming-Woman, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible' in *Thinking Italian Animals: Human and Posthuman in Twentieth Century Italian Literature and Film*, ed. by Deborah Amberson and Elena Past (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp.129-144, p.131.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.* p.143.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, p.139.

se.’<sup>331</sup> In the context of Morante’s work, creaturely life is the redemptive, un-self-reflexive animal life exposed to the violence of history. It is important to highlight at this stage that to be ‘creaturely’ is not synonymous with ‘being animal’: the creaturely is an expression of trauma experienced as the clash between biology and history, and the fundamental feeling of exposure that an entrapment in the political provokes. Hence, with reference to Santner and Agamben’s reflection on creatureliness and ‘bare life’ I will ask how experience, the lived event, leaves a remainder which escapes verbal articulation and inscribes itself on the body of those affected. This leads to further questions concerning the narrator’s voice as a mediator of traumatic affect: how can Morante combine her third person narratorial focalisation with empathy since the characters, unable to articulate their suffering themselves, radiate their pain wordlessly? Is Morante claiming to speak *for* or to speak *as* the suffering beings in her novel: does this description of trauma carry some ethical weight or are the accusations of Morante’s *vicarious* depictions of suffering justified? This chapter will highlight that the creaturely emerges at the point of intersection between traumatised bodies and historical violence and will consider the function of an animal vocabulary to describe this worldlessly suffering body. At the same time, the undeniable presence of creaturely life in Morante’s novel is often concentrated in the figure of Useppe, the child protagonist of the novel. *La Storia*’s complex overlap of extreme physical degradation following the traumatising impact of history and the utopian value accorded to childhood in Morante’s work deserves further exploration. To do this, I will examine Morante’s integration of experience and representation, as the characters do not testify to their suffering but become riddled with ‘creaturely’ signs which not only inflect the embodied impact of historical violence but signal the potential redemptive value of being subjected to history as victim.

Furthermore, *La Storia* also shows how the macro and the micro levels of experience as ‘History’ and individual ‘story’ rely on an interplay of spaces and I will examine these in a second section. Felix Siddell’s examination of space in Morante and Buzzati in his 2006 book *Sense and Place in Buzzati and Morante* focuses on the importance of affect in the generation of spatial consciousness and he states that Morante’s maps are ‘structures of ambition and desire.’<sup>332</sup> He argues that the acquisition of ‘map consciousness’ undoes the Edenic osmosis between being and space which occurs in Morante’s childhood novels namely *L’Isola*

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<sup>331</sup> Marian Scholtmeijer, *Animal Victims in Modern Fiction: From Sanctity to Sacrifice* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1993), p.89.

<sup>332</sup> Felix Siddell, *Sense of Place in Buzzati and Morante* (Leicester: Troubador, 2006), p.206.



*d'Arturo*: for this purpose the critic identifies the forest and the sea as primordial landscapes in *La Storia*.<sup>333</sup> Though Siddell argues persuasively for the development of spatial perception in the process of maturity as a fall from grace, I wish to build on his reading by regarding selected spaces in *La Storia* as juxtapositions of animal habitats and historical locations. The creatural and the political are dynamically related in the novel, following Foucault's theoretical injunction regarding the importance of space: 'A whole history remains to be written of spaces – which would at the same time be the history of powers – from the great strategies of geopolitics to the little tactics of the habitat.'<sup>334</sup> The novel's spatial location vacillates between Rome as a strategic point on the world stage and the city as one family's habitat in their struggle to survive. Rome is a contested city from the outset, a symbol of Italy's complex memory of its participation in the Second World War. My discussion of the juxtaposition of geopolitical and animal uses of space will touch on these questions of Italian historical consciousness with relation to the legacies of Fascism and Nazi collaboration. Symbolic spaces, such as nests and wombs abound in the novel as do references to the more literal spaces of the city's centre and periphery. In the novel's representation of embodiment and its attitude to space, *La Storia* provides an invaluable approach to the uneasy coexistence of the creatural materiality of living things and their space in history, for which an evaluation of the role of children and animals provides a crucial introduction.

### **The creaturely innocence of animals and children in *La Storia***

While many reflections on Morante's oeuvre hint at the presence of animals in passing, the presence of actual animals and the use of animal imagery in Elsa Morante's work has been largely underdiscussed. In a recent article, Saskia Ziolkowski notes how the presence of animals in Morante's work 'presents a worldview that includes animals, in a portrayal that partially attempts to balance more official histories that concentrate on the powerful.'<sup>335</sup> However, I suggest that the scope of Morante's representation of animals is far richer in *La Storia* where the animal crystallises issues surrounding trauma, suffering, communication and victimhood. Though her earlier novels *Menzogna e Sortilegio* and *L'Isola di Arturo* feature animals as companions with more understanding than morally corrupt humans, *La Storia* stands out in Morante's oeuvre because it includes animal presences and animal experience into what

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<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, p.205.

<sup>334</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, tr. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p.149.

<sup>335</sup> Saskia Ziolkowski, 'Morante and Kafka: The Gothic Walking Dead and Talking Animals' in Lucamante 2015, pp.53-66, p.60.

is usually described as the particularly human experience of war. However, *La Storia* opens a space to think about animals in the context of human experience as well as to envisage the similarities of human and animal modes of being and the consequences of this in the context of devastating historical situations. In her 1987 article ‘Soltanto l’animale è veramente innocente’ on animals in *La Storia*, Concetta d’Angeli identifies three categories of animals in the novel. Firstly, animals are characters: ‘veri e propri personaggi, completamente autonomi.’<sup>336</sup> The dogs Blitz and Bella who both take on major roles in the narrative would feature under this category, as would the cat Rossella. Secondly, D’Angeli maintains that animality offers a repertoire of images to shed insight onto the human condition: ‘è un repertorio di paragoni e d’immagini che servono a illuminare meglio la condizione umana.’<sup>337</sup> Thirdly, the critic describes animality as a metaphor which conveys the fluidity of animal and human identities and allows for humans to metamorphose into non-human modes of being. D’Angeli’s categories are helpful as a starting point, but do not elucidate how the vocabulary of the animal is mobilised to convey victimhood, the central tenet of Morante’s novel. As I will show in my discussion on creatureliness further on, this third category is problematic; metamorphosis in the novel is characterised by the impact of war and occurs when humans become traumatised by their exposure to historical events. Metamorphosis then becomes the process that registers the traumatic impact of a historical situation on the animal or human body which makes d’Angeli’s third category of animals in the novel more like creaturely being than animal being.

The greatest concentration of animal imagery is linked to the protagonist, Ida, who firstly, harnesses her animal instincts to protect her family and secondly, is described as an animal to convey her sense of persecution due to being half-Jewish. Mainly, Morante deploys animal metaphors in her descriptions of Ida in order to emphasise her lack of rational or political participation in her environment. By profession she is a schoolteacher, but this comes down to the fact that she feels more comfortable in the company of children than of adults. Although the state dictates the historical content of her courses, the narrator underlines Ida’s ‘mental purity’ derived from the fact that she has no historical consciousness whatsoever:

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<sup>336</sup> Concetta d’Angeli, ‘“Soltanto l’animale è veramente innocente” – Gli animali nella Storia’, in *Lecture di Elsa Morante* (Torino: Rosenberg and Sellier, 1987), pp.62-67, p.66.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*, p.67.

secondo le ordini delle autorità essa introduceva nei dettati i re, duci, patrie, glorie e battaglie che la Storia imponeva; però lo faceva in tutta purezza mentale e senza nessun sospetto perché la storia non meno di Dio, non era mai stato argomento dei suoi pensieri (475).

As the novel progresses, her mothering instinct is totally taken over by her fear of being persecuted and victimised, to the extent that she is portrayed in terms of a hounded animal ‘si ritrovava di nuovo peggio di prima, spersa e vile come un cane di nessuno perseguitato dall’acchiappacani’ (366). Whilst she is unaware of the historiographical, linear constructs of history, she registers the impact of historical events as physical sensations and instinctive impulses.

Ida’s material identification with the animal divests her of any self-determination and emphasises her creatural vulnerability to a faceless ‘potere universale’ – an eternal and ahistorical force intent on praying on Ida’s embodied fragility:

la stranezza di quegli occhi ricordava l’idiozia misteriosa degli animal i quali non sanno con la mente, ma con un senso dei loro corpi vulnerabili, ‘sanno’ il passato e il futuro di ogni destino. Chiamerei quel senso che in loro è comune, il senso del sacro; intendosi da loro, per sacro, il potere universale che può mangiarli e annientarli per la loro colpa di essere nati (21).

Throughout the novel, she is frequently subjected to this ‘potere universale’ and nowhere more distressingly than when she is raped by a juvenile German soldier. Yet, she suffers from epilepsy which detaches her emotionally from moments of extreme violence: when she is raped by the German soldier, she immediately has a fit which severs her from the material reality of her assault (‘nella sua memoria in realtà, c’era un interruzione totale, dal momento che il giovane s’era messo a baciarla in faccia bisbigliandole *carina carina*’, 71) paradoxically provoking a sense of extreme happiness. The rape is imaginatively transformed into a moment of communion with the rest of nature, and turned into a sort of utopian primal scene: ‘Era tutti i centomila animali ragazzi, terrestri e vulnerabili, in un ballo pazzo e allegro, che si ripercuotava fino nell’interno dei suoi polmoni e fino alle radici dei suoi capelli, chiamandola in tutte le lingue’ (70). Lydia Oram sees the rape as a moment of rapture, which is both redemptive and revolutionary in historiographical terms; her view is that the episode ‘refigures historical configurations.’<sup>338</sup> Rather than a one-way moment of violence against a woman, Oram claims that Ida ‘dominates the significance of the rape [...] by reworking this

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<sup>338</sup> Lydia M. Oram, ‘Rape, Rapture and Revision: Visionary Imagery and Historical Reconstruction in Elsa Morante’s *La Storia*’, *Forum Italicum* 37:2 (Fall 2003), pp.409-435, p.409.

memory through ecstatic imagery.<sup>339</sup> Yet, due to the fact that the rape coincides with an epileptic fit and loss of memory, it is difficult to attribute any real agency to Ida's imagination of the rape scene as one of universal commonality.

Rather than enabling the reader to attribute any kind of agency to Ida in this moment of violence, her ecstatic vision caused by this violation serves two functions. Firstly, in a novel that shies away from explicit depictions of death or violence despite its historical setting, Ida's fit accommodates the sensitivity of the reader neutralising the damaging and traumatic overtones of the episode. Secondly, the association of ecstatic vision with moments of degradation echo underlines the deep fissure within the self provoked by a moment of violence. Venturi, della Colletta and Re all discuss epilepsy as a symptom of historical victimhood. Whereas the former discusses the link between epilepsy, visionary imagery and hope 'perché dalle sofferenze nasce il rinnamoramento e la speranza',<sup>340</sup> Colletta sees epilepsy as the physical stigma that initiates the perpetrator/victim mechanism.<sup>341</sup> Whilst I agree with the views expressed above, I feel that Useppe's epilepsy is a symptom, a creaturely signifying stress whereby the violence of History is imprinted on his physical form. Temkin's study of epilepsy notes how fits symbolically and historically connote being 'seized' by divinity, removed from the world of human affairs. This in turn has disturbing connotations for what Temkin calls 'life in the polis' in his analysis of Roman attitudes to epilepsy; conclusively, the etymology of the word 'fit' (from 'to fit in', 'to be made to fit') denotes a crisis for Temkin 'dramatiz[ing] biopolitical inscription.'<sup>342</sup> Ida's fit during her rape highlights the gulf between her exposure to the violence of her social circumstances, and her inability to engage with it (and Morante's unwillingness to let the reader appreciate the real violence of the episode) on any kind of cognitive level.

This is deeply problematic in that historically contingent violence is overlain with redemptive universal meaning, disabling a critical engagement with the historical context and the circumstances of ordinary Italians during the siege of Rome in the final years of the war. Nevertheless, several critics endorse this redemptive innocence, such as Patuzzi who sees animals as a reserve of utopian purity in the novel which contrasts with the cruelty inherent to

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<sup>339</sup> *Ibid*, p.425.

<sup>340</sup> Gianni Venturi, *Elsa Morante* (Firenze: Il Castoro, 1977), p.110.

<sup>341</sup> Della Colletta, p.139.

<sup>342</sup> Owsei Temkin, *The Falling Sickness: A History of Epilepsy from the Greeks to the Beginnings of Modern Neurology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1994), p.8,22.

history.<sup>343</sup> Rather than historical witnesses and agents, the citizens of Rome are refigured as sanctified witnesses of violence as a universalised topos of modern life, opposed to the sheer innocence of the creaturely human being.

Furthermore, Ida's lack of historical consciousness and physical alertness to her vulnerability is compounded by her Jewish identity, described in terms of its creatural, rather than historical or social, ramifications. Ida sees Usepe's epilepsy as the evidence of an internalised victimhood due to his Jewish heritage: 'una prova immane e senza colpa, la scelta inconsapevole d'una creatura isolate che raccogliesse la tragedia collettiva' (30). Troublingly, Morante's narrator seems to identify Jewishness with a universal state of victimhood, which cannot shed light onto the real circumstances of Italy's participation in the marginalisation and deportation of Jews as a result of complicity with Hitler's Third Reich. The grotesque and monstrous associations of Jews with animals in *La Storia* not only seem to reflect discriminatory discourses of the time, but also highlight the material level at which experiences of discrimination and historical violence are perpetrated. Ida's Jewish mother suffers episodes of panic attacks caused by the 'sdoppiamento' of being a Jew married to a Gentile; during one such episode she is identified with a monstrous beast, and an enemy, inexplicitly evoking attitudes to politically and racially marginalised others in pre-war Italy: 'Non era lei, ma una sorta di bestia sanguisuga, sua nemica, che le si aggrappava all'interno, forzandola a una recitazione pazza e incomprensibile' (23). As Sarfatti notes, from 1936 onwards, issues relating to race and racial purity were gaining traction in Italy following the East African campaign: 'the policies of creating distinctions, defining inferiority, establishing hierarchies limiting and revoking rights and removing people from Italy proper were being worked out in various ways.'<sup>344</sup> At the same time, Morante associates Jewish suffering with material fragility which collapses the boundary between the human and animal, thematising the implications of historic violence for the definition of the human. Katrin Wehling-Giorgi persuasively argues that the Jewish ghetto evinces Ida's entrenchment in the pre-symbolic (due to her regressive identity: 'era in fondo, rimasta una bambina', 21) and her identification with Jewish suffering shows her marginalisation from centres of political power and her oppression by patriarchal forms.<sup>345</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> Claudia Patuzzi has recently endorsed the equivalence of animality with innocence and the sacred in Morante in her 2009 article on animal imagery in Italian women's writing: 'Animalità e altre parole', *Leggendaria* 77-78 (November 2009), pp.66-71.

<sup>344</sup> Michele Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy: From Equality to Persecution*, tr. by John and Anne Tedeschi (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), p.109.

<sup>345</sup> Katrin Wehling-Giorgi, "'Totetaco': The Mother-Child Dyad and the Pre-Conceptual Self in Elsa Morante's *La Storia* and *Aracoeli*", *Forum for Modern Language Studies* (49: 2013), p.192-200, p.194.

When Ida and Useppe witness the Jews locked up in the cattle cars following the *razzia* of the Roman ghetto in September 1943, the cries of the deportees denote the ‘fisicità bestiale’ (245) of those imprisoned in the cars. The narrator in this section presents a point of resistance to Ida’s identification of the Jewish ghetto as ‘una stalla materna, calda di respiri animali’ (238) by stressing that the victims of Nazi-Fascist deportation are not animals, but people: ‘Non era, come Ida s’era già indotta a credere, il grido degli animali ammassati nei trasporti’ (243, *emph. mine*). *La Storia*’s narrator shows discomfort with the collapse of the persecutees with animals and troubles Ida’s positive identification of the marginalised with a redemptive innocence. While Wehling-Giorgi’s account no doubt localises the emergence of subjectivity in forms of inscription within patriarchal hierarchy, Ida’s ‘regression to the pre-conceptual realm’ which the commentator sees as a ‘shelter from the external threats of war’ does not give any option to intervene positively and politically into the symbolic order.<sup>346</sup> Though Ida destabilises hegemonic patriarchy with which History is identified by drawing attention to how this faceless process victimises the marginalised, Morante’s collapse of social isolation and animality entrenches hegemonic structures and behaviours seeking to differentiate the other, as the next section will show.

### **The witness as victim, the body as register: the ‘signifying stresses’ of the past**

Whereas d’Angeli suggests that Useppe’s consciousness has an opacity to traumatic events when she suggests that ‘davanti a ogni piccolo e grande episodio di violenza e di morte conserva l’inerte malinconia e la coscienza oscura dello sguardo animale;’ Useppe is actually highly susceptible to what happens around him and it is the encounter with wartime violence that alters his cheerful simplicity.<sup>347</sup> Nor can we say that Useppe inhabits a purely immanent and present timeframe, as della Colletta argues: ‘he lives in a visionary state, an absolute present in drastic contrast to the linear time of history.’<sup>348</sup> As this section will show, Useppe’s physicality is inscribed with the material traces of visual traumas he has experienced first-hand or in a mediated way regarding the violence of the Second World War, and particularly the Holocaust. Thus, his physicality is oriented toward the past which it radiates through its creaturely ‘signifying stresses’, to use Santner’s term. The immediate wartime past and the encounter with violence has a nefarious effect on his physicality, which I will be calling creaturely as a result of its vulnerability to the external, historical violence and suffering.

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<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>347</sup> d’Angeli, p.70.

<sup>348</sup> Della Colletta, p.139.

Useppe's body is vulnerable to signs of victimhood which he begins to absorb onto himself. Problematically, Morante's narrator's investment in the child's passive absorption of creaturely 'cringes' (to use Santner's term) establishes Useppe as a model of empathetic engagement but does not offer any alternative, empowering modes of identification beyond those of traumatisation and victimhood.

When he chances upon some photographs of released concentration camp prisoners in a magazine he is overwhelmed by an incomprehensible and inexpressible sadness, looking at his mother with 'i suoi occhi si levarono a lei, vuoti e scolorati, come quelli di un ciecolino' (373). Though Useppe is aligned with messianic and redemptive innocence, Re confirms that this confrontation with archival material about the Holocaust marks the 'moment in which Useppe begins to intuit and learn about the deadly fact of racial difference and oppression and also the moment in which he begins to die, as the splendour of his eyes becomes increasingly obscured by the horrors he witnesses.'<sup>349</sup> Instead of being able to talk through the trauma of seeing these photographs, which he cannot reconcile with the materiality of the people they represent, he registers their suffering on his body.<sup>350</sup> The body conflates experience and event; Ida notices how Useppe is similarly transfixed when she sees the deportees waiting for departure in the Roman ghetto. His body is agitated by a tremor: 'Ida risentì un tremito per il corpo, quasi che una grossa mano la scuotesse' (373). The exposure to archival footage reconfigures the violence depicted and Useppe's cringed body crumbles under the burden of witnessing violence.

For Santner, the signifying stress epitomises creaturely life whereby the traumatised ego leads to an altered physicality; such stresses occur when meaning breaks down and translation between the individual and the other's experience becomes impossible. The suffering of the other is a message which can only be partially understood but not digested as experience per se, so that it continues to remain active as a residue, but not as a useful part of experience to be integrated into the ego. Santner, following Laplanche, sees this as the beginning of neurosis: 'Unconscious mental life gets mobilised around such enigmatic signifiers that can never be fully metabolised, translated into the projects that make up the life of the ego. They persist as the loci of signifying stress, excitations linked to but not absorbed

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<sup>349</sup> Lucia Re, 'Utopian Longing and the Constraints of Racial and Sexual Difference in Elsa Morante's *La Storia*' *Italica* 70.3 (1993), p.365.

<sup>350</sup> Elsewhere his inability to read highlights how images and impressions cannot be converted into the realm of reason, but rather rest in the realm of pure affect: 'Lui stentava a riconoscere, nell'unidimensionalità della stampa, le forme concrete' (369).

by our life in the space of meaning.’<sup>351</sup> The cumulative effect of witnessing and registering the wordless suffering and the untranslatable signifying stress of the other’s creaturely being cause a decline in Useppe whose susceptibility to violence actively diminishes his vitality and marks him out as a vicarious victim. Thus, the sight of the photographs evokes something familiar in his mind, indicating his visceral understanding of the suffering materiality of the concentration camp prisoners: ‘pareva interrogasse un enigma, di natura ambigua e deforme, eppure oscuramente familiare’ (370). The encounter with the suffering of another living being fundamentally alters Useppe’s physiology: ‘D’un tratto, lo sguardo di Giuseppe subì un mutamento strano e mai prima veduto, del quale, tuttavia, nessuno si accorse. Una specie di tristezza o di sospetto lo attraversò, come se una piccolo tenda buia gli calasse davanti’ (125).<sup>352</sup> Useppe’s innocence is anchored in his animal purity and his messianic connotations are denoted by the circumstances of his birth: ‘Era una creaturina così piccolo, che stava comodamente sulle due mani della levatrice, come in una canasta. [...] Non gli era rimasta nemmeno la voce per piangere. Si annunciò con un vagito così leggero che pareva un caprettino nato ultimo e scordato fra la paglia’ (40). Ida gives him the surname ‘Angiolino’ to connote his eyes, linked to the colour of the heavens (‘occhi celesti’) and his natural goodness (‘che si faceva poco sentire’). Elsa Mortante inherits from a literary convention highlighted by Pinfold that sees the child, as ‘a miraculous being whose clarity of vision is part of his heavenly inheritance’ following Wordsworth’s reflections on childhood in his *Ode* in which the child is addressed thus:

Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie thy soul’s immensity;  
Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep  
Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind.<sup>353</sup>

His animal innocence and his passivity in the face of historical fate resonate with Adorno and Horkheimer’s note in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* that in folklore, ‘to be condemned to inhabit an animal body was to be damned,’ due to the muteness of the animal, symptom of its irrationality. Under Fascism, the fascination for animals, children and nature is ‘rooted in the lust to persecute’, in the desire to destroy weaker beings in the name of dominant practices of violence. But the authors conclude that only in the voice of that ‘which exists to be broken’, that is the animal, the feminine, the irrational voice, ‘is accompanied by the fearful

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<sup>351</sup> Santner, p.34.

<sup>352</sup> However, Morante is not consistent with her compassion for animals since Nino boasts about the new collar he buys for his dog made from real leather.

<sup>353</sup> Pinfold, p.i, 9.



reverberations, which, as in every animal, sound even in one's own rationalised and broken heart.<sup>354</sup> Thus, Useppe's association with the divine, which Morante links to all children in her work, is undone by the historical and political forces operating against him.

Useppe's decline is traced in terms of animal weakness. At school, he whimpers 'come un gattuccio di strada abbandonato' (447). The diminutives attached to the decline of Useppe demonstrate the narrator's melodramatic manipulation of the child's demise in his conflation with the animal demanding empathy and pity. Derrida's *animot* conflates the nexus of suffering, divinity and creatureliness in Useppe: the wordplay centres on the plural of animal in French (*animaux*), as well as reinserting speech into something presumed to be mute by playing on the homonym *mot* and *maux*. 'Animot' suggests that animals can signify without speaking and therefor resist a hierarchical, hegemonious way of writing, convergent with Lucia Re's analysis of Useppe as a resistant to patriarchal hegemony. The plural indicator of the French *animaux* also offers a play on the word *maux* meaning evils or suffering suggesting that animals are signs, traces of suffering in animation, in agitation [*animé*] and that creaturely agitation is the signification of their suffering of the exposed suffering being animated by and within the forces of history.<sup>355</sup> According to Santner, 'Creatureliness does not mean a dimension that traverses the boundaries of human and nonhuman forms of life, than a specifically human way of finding oneself caught in the midst of antagonisms in and of the political field.'<sup>356</sup> In this way, Useppe's creatureliness undermines his animal innocence, as he is always already contaminated by the agitating and traumatising circumstances of his conception and birth in the build-up to World War Two. He is not actually an animal *and* a human being but a traumatised, altered being whose traumatising cannot be articulated through any other means that by likening him to the animal world which does not quite circumscribe his condition but the animal world provides a vocabulary and iconography which allows the extent of his alteration to become apparent.

### **Real histories, real victims**

By deploying a narrative vocabulary of the helpless, abandoned and exposed animal, Morante's novel mobilises the affective impact and redemptive value of the victimhood, to the extent that one could criticise the novel for pandering to the kind of acritical engagement with

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<sup>354</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1997), p.253,254.

<sup>355</sup> Derrida, 'The Animal', p.27,47.

<sup>356</sup> Santner, p.xv.

the past that Konrad Liesmann has described as that of the ‘good person’ (*der gute Mensch*), in a productive overlap with the pervasive neutralising and victimising myth of *Italiani Brava Gente* which disabled honest confrontations with Fascist Italy’s complicity with the ruinous Nazi regime.<sup>357</sup> Liesmann defines his understanding of the ethics of the ‘good person’ as one dominated by affect: ‘Der gute Mensch ist ein fühlendes Wesen. Gefühl ist ihm alles. Und die liebste Gefühle sind ihm: Betroffenheit, Angst und Empörung.’<sup>358</sup> By confronting the reader with characters overwhelmed by their passivity to the brutality of their historical circumstances, one cannot help but sympathise with their ‘being affected’ [*Betroffenheit*] as the essence of history portrayed by Morante is highly unambiguous in its division of victims versus powerful, where power is a faceless, endangering force (*‘il potere universale che può mangiarli e annientarli’*), as is Ida’s obscure awareness of her own position as victim in what Garboli has called Morante’s vision of ‘questa società amministratrice di Storia.’)<sup>359</sup> Morante’s itemisation of historical evils in her chapter prologues showcases History as a series of processes aimed at the destruction and degradation of all living things, denoting Liesmann’s characterisation of the ‘good person’: ‘Der gute Mensch ist gut, weil andere böse sind.’<sup>360</sup> The affective approach to history criticised by Liesmann ‘ersetzt das Denken durch die Moral’ (‘replaces thought with morality’), and denotes a fatalistic historical process whereby the powerful victimise the powerless, who are affected by but cannot effect any positive agency in history. Garboli’s evaluation of history within *La Storia* evinces how this moral fatalism associated with victimhood places Germany as the ‘evil’ agent of history, with Italy undergoing its brutalisation: ‘*La Storia* è un romanzo pieno di Storia; la Storia vi è descritta e ampiamente rappresentata; i tedeschi uccidono e sono uccisi; le città sono bombardate; gli ebrei deportati; e gli Alleati entrano a Roma.’<sup>361</sup> Indeed, the ‘evil’ destructive agency of the Germans and the association of the Germans with the mystical, all-powerful, negative force of destruction Morante calls history is evident when the narrator notes ‘per il popolo, i tedeschi apparivano peggio che dei nemici [...] l’annuncio dei tedeschi agisse all’intorno come una sorta di

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<sup>357</sup> Claudio Fogu’s analysis concludes that the myth is so pervasive because Italians had convinced themselves on the political and cultural level that ‘in their own eyes and in the eyes of the liberators, Italians possessed a fundamental banality of goodness that had prevented them from perpetrating inhuman or criminal acts.’ Claudio Fogu, ‘Italiani brava gente: The Legacy of Fascist Historical Culture on Italian politics of Memory’ in *The Politics of Memory in Post-War Europe*, ed. by Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner, Claudio Fogu (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), pp.147-176, p.147.

<sup>358</sup> Konrad Paul Liesmann, *Der gute Mensch von Österreich. Essays 1980-1995* (Wien: Sonderzahl, 1995), p.33: ‘The good person is a feeling creature. Affect is everything to it. And its favourite affects are: being affected, fear and outrage.’

<sup>359</sup> Cesare Garboli, ‘Introduzione’, *La Storia* (Torino: Einaudi, 1995), pp. v-xxvi, p. xvii.

<sup>360</sup> Liesmann, *ibid.*: ‘the good person is good, because the others are evil.’

<sup>361</sup> Garboli, p.xix.

maledizione' (200). Morante's disempowering victim-centric notion of history poses crucial questions formulated by Dominick LaCapra in his *History and Memory after Auschwitz* where he asks whether 'art has a responsibility with respect to traumatic events that remain invested with value and emotion,' and with LaCapra I would argue that literature that stages 'falsifications, repressions, displacements and denials' is informative of 'that object's [history's] anxiety-ridden reception';<sup>362</sup> thus, *La Storia*'s investment in powerlessness, via the creaturely trope of the dehumanised and affected victim, is indicative of how anxieties regarding Italian participation in the Holocaust, and in the Second World War are worked out.

One such displacement of affect is particularly indicative: as we saw above, Usepe responds with devastating emotional intensity, prefiguring his death, to the mediated images of concentration camp suffering. Yet, when he actually encounters real victims of the Holocaust in the street, they are described in dehumanising and defamiliarising terms; there is therefore an imbalance between Morante's depiction of the overwhelming affective charge of mediated images of suffering and the difficulty of integrating the image of unmediated suffering into the redemptive framehood of victimhood. The child encounters one of the few returnees from the Roman ghetto in the street: these crazed survivors batter their heads against walls and shout incomprehensible sentences as a means of communicating their pasts. Their embodiment is abject and disgusting: 'al posto delle guance tenevano due buchi, molti di loro non avevano quasi più denti, e sulle teste rase, da poco aveva preso a ricrescergli una peluria piumosa, simile a quella delle creature' (376). They are described as incomprehensible, but the narrator also makes it clear that no one wants to interact with these victims of dehumanisation and persecution: 'queste figure spettrali come i numeri negative, al di sotto di ogni veduta naturale, e impossibili fino alla comune simpatia. La gente voleva rimuoverli dalle proprie giornate come dalle famiglie normali si rimuove la presenza dei pazzi, o dei morti.' (377). The survivors' suffering cannot be integrated into the experience of post-war Italian survivors in a ruined Rome, and they are rejected. The Holocaust survivors' embodied reaction to their suffering is in line with Lupton's definition of the creaturely as 'actively passive or passionate nature of any being that is produced or controlled by an agent, author, master or tyrant' which conflates embodied victimhood with passivity to historical agents (here the Nazis, but equally the author, producing embodied visions of violence).<sup>363</sup> Elsewhere in Morante's work, the referential

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<sup>362</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), p.19.

<sup>363</sup> Lupton, cited by Thomas Menely, *The Animal Claim: Sensibility and the Creaturely Voice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p.14.

instability of the genocide survivor also effects the same troubling reversal of Morante's redemptive connotation of the animal in the disturbing figure of the creature.

Scialòm, the figure of the wandering Jew in Morante's final novel *Aracoeli* (1982), is excluded from the Italian jurisdiction as a Jew and the year he is discovered in the forest by the young protagonist Manuele, 1943, corresponds to that of the purge of the Roman ghetto.<sup>364</sup> Scialòm is described as being covered in hair: 'In passato vi dimorava dentro una grotto, un ebreo fuggito dalla Russia di nome Scialòm, il quale campando sempre fisso fra le neve eterne, s'era tutto coperto di peli candidi' (1222). His dog-like furriness is re-emphasised further on, noting the troubling impact of this figure on the narrator: 'Scialòm si era fatto peloso come certi cani, di cui per il troppo pelo, non vedono più gli occhi, né altre fattezze. Anzi oramai non si capiva se questo Scialòm fosse uomo o cane' (1245). Scialòm appears during a salient historical point in *Aracoeli*, where Jews were excluded from the cities, and on the run from racial laws legitimising their extermination, linking Scialòm to Agamben's discussion of the 'Wolf Man':

the life of the bandit, like that of the sacred man, is not a piece of animal nature without any relation to the law and the city. It is rather a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, *physis and nomos* (matter and law), exclusion and inclusion: the life of the bandit is the life of the werewolf, who is precisely neither man nor beast, who dwells precisely within both and belonging to neither.<sup>365</sup>

Agamben defines this in the following terms: 'The transformation into a werewolf corresponds perfectly to the state of exception, during which time the city is dissolved and men enter into a zone of indistinction in which they are no longer distinguished from beasts.'<sup>366</sup> The state of exception applies when a society is threatened internally or externally by a threat (here, the example of the Second World War and its threat to all of humanity in *Aracoeli* and *La Storia*), the Sovereign can create a space where the law ceases to apply. Agamben's notion of sovereignty overlaps with Morante's faceless account of 'History'. In *La Storia*, Ida is frightened by the appearance of a 'wolf man' in the animalistic shelter of the 'stanzone' (a space which I discuss further on, which, like the bandit for Agamben, has 'no relation to the law and city'): 'rassomigliava [...] piuttosto che un uomo, a un qualche altro mammifero affamato di specie notturna, come di un lupo mannaro' (289). Thus, anomalous political

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<sup>364</sup> Elsa Morante, *Aracoeli* in *Opere II* (Torino: Einaudi, 1990). All subsequent references in the text.

<sup>365</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p.105.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, p.107.

discourses surrounding the necessity of the extermination of the Jews for the sake of the expansion of the Nazi-Fascist empire legitimise the exceptional violence directed towards a particular group whose elimination will guarantee the continuation of the state. The wandering Jew figure in *Aracoeli* also corresponds to the wolf-man as the man without peace, who cannot live within the city, which guarantees community and safety for those who live within it. Scialòm resolves this tension by being baptised as a Christian before his death, changing his parodic Hebrew name to the name 'Leone', a name loaded with Christian heraldic significance. This troubling fissure between on the one hand the messianic valuation of Useppe and Ida as passive, animalised victims of history and the more ambivalent portrayals of real victims in the throes of historical traumatisation enables a re-evaluation of one of Morante's central philosophical preoccupations, namely of Spinoza's thought, which I will allude to briefly via the character of Carulì.

Agamben noted that the collapse of the difference of animal and human would result in a category of enduring 'bare life' and that such a collapse was reserved to an age of redemption where when 'the relation between animals and people will take on a new form ... and the human being will be reconciled with his animal nature.'<sup>367</sup> On this point, the critic and lifelong friend of Morante's disagrees with her resistance to Spinoza's species hierarchy which may not be as firmly entrenched in the author's philosophy as Morante and Agamben claim. Agamben seems to think that Morante ignores the degrading potential for bare life, but the examples of Scialòm and Carulì trouble Morante's messianic attachments to the animal and childhood. In her 'Canzone dei F.P e degli I.M', Morante places Spinoza at the top of her tree of philosophical influences, for his 'festa del tesoro nascosto', which Agamben sees as the 'spiritualisation of matter.' Agamben's analysis of Morante's annotated copy of Spinoza evinces how she disagreed with the philosophers' claim that 'people have more virtue and power than animals' but warned that her location of the animal and the child in paradise risked creating bare life, due to the indivisibility of animal and human within the human creature.<sup>368</sup>

An important intertext with Kafka's *Metamorphosis* in the description of the figure of Carulì reveals a discomfort with the figure of the animal, and thereby re-evaluates Morante's valuation of the unmitigable innocence of the creature. The thirteen-year old girl belongs to the large family (or tribù) who inhabit the shelter with Ida and Useppe after their apartment is

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<sup>367</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open*, tr. Kevill Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p.3

<sup>368</sup> See Anke Snoek, *Agamben's Joyful Kafka* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp.60-61 for a powerful reading of this conversation between the three thinkers.

shelled. She is ostensibly human, and she communicates albeit idiosyncratically in her mixture of Neapolitan dialect and Italian. However, when she arrives at Pietralata, the sight of the pregnant, emaciated thirteen-year old, ‘faceva l’effetto di un fenomeno di natura: così piccola e con una pancia enorme, tale che non si capiva come potesse, lei, sui suoi piedini, portarsela appresso’ (183). Caruli’s primitivity becomes clear at her unawareness of the historical events that, after all, caused her and her family to flee from Naples to take refuge in Rome. She ingenuously describes how a fallen shell dropped by an American fighter plane turns out to be a gigantic, coloured Easter egg which portrays her complete idiocy and blockage in early infancy but equally problematises the controversial topic of the Allied Bombing of Southern Italy which I will discuss later in the chapter. She has no idea how she came to be pregnant and is portrayed, affectionately, as a complete simpleton: she is completely illiterate and the narrator compares her to her newborn twins whom she breastfeeds without inhibitions: ‘senza vergogna, come cosa naturale’ (184). Her lack of shame reveals her lack of consciousness, like an animal, in Derrida’s sense, Caruli is “is not naked because [she] is naked. [She] doesn’t feel its[her] own nudity. There is no nudity ‘in nature.’”<sup>369</sup> While the girl’s seeming innocence to the world around her are initially endearing and child-like, the intertextual descriptions of Caruli linking her to the figure of the creature in Kafka’s works highlight how her physicality, rather than stemming from the purity of her natural innocence, rather emanates from her total physical, emotional and sexual oppression among the brutalities of wartime.<sup>370</sup> Her enormous belly and little feet ‘piedini’ resonate with Kafka’s portrayal of Gregor Samsa, who for Santner resonates with Agamben’s theory of the *Homo Sacer*, unfit for destruction, unwelcome in society:

il suo corpicino disarmonica, e già sfiancato dalla doppia gravidanza al punto che il movimento delle sue gambe ne risultava sbilanciato, dandole una camminata storta e buffa, come quella di certi cuccioli bastardi. Dalla sua schiena magrolina, le scapula sporgevano eccessivamente, come due ali mozzate e spiumate. E la sua faccia era irregolare, con la bocca troppo grande. (186)<sup>371</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> Derrida, *op.cit.*, p.5.

<sup>370</sup> Caruli’s pregnancy is described as ‘la sua inopinata promozione a madre’ (184), denoting a disturbing passivity in matters of sexuality suggesting she may be a victim of rape. Indeed, she comes to Rome from Naples, where Norman Lewis notes that upon the invasion of the city in 1943 the British had to build a camp to protect the city’s women from rape by foreign soldiers. See Norman Lewis, *Naples ’44* (New York: Carroll & Graff, 2005), p.131.

<sup>371</sup> Kafka’s salesman is described as ‘ein Ungeziefer’ (a bug) with a gigantic vaulted stomach and ‘flimmernde Beinen’. See Franz Kafka, ‘Die Verwandlung’, *Sämtliche Erzählungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1995), pp.56-99, p.56).

There is some concern for physiological integrity between animal and human in Carulina in that her liminality is more anxiety-provoking than it is cathartic.

Useppe, Carulì and Scialòm reveal the ambiguity of Morante's messianic innocence resonating in Agamben's diagnosis in *Means without End*: 'For Elsa all greatness contains an inner threat with which it is in constant combat and to which it at times succumbs.' He continues that this 'shadowy part coincides with the tragico-sacrificial mythology that identifies the creature's bare life as the most absolute innocence and as the most absolute guilt.'<sup>372</sup> Turning to Weil, is for Agamben 'a temptation of the spirit in the desert', which cannot be reconciled with the vicissitudes of life in history unless one resorts to the impasse of passivity and victimhood. This, for Agamben, is an inherently nihilistic and unproductive position linking redemption with the scapegoat resting of the nexus of 'sacrificial innocence and guilt, sanctity and abjection, victim and executioner are bound for the sake of catharsis': an untenable resolution when politically urgent and historically divisive issues of national identity and agency are at stake.<sup>373</sup> When Useppe goes to Tiburtina station with Nino and is downcast at the sight of a calf tied for slaughter, the narrator notes that a complicity between the two beings singled out for historical victimhood occurs: 'forse fra gli occhi del bambino e quelli della bestia si svolse un qualche scambio inopinato, sotteraneo e impercettibile' (125). Mecchia refers to Deleuze and Guattari's 'blocks of becoming' as a 'sign not only of creatural dispossession and biopolitical oppression but also of the joyous potentialities of living', though I argue this 'cosmic plane of immanence' is destined to always remain unfulfilled due to the omnipresent, brutal violence of historical circumstance.<sup>374</sup>

With ambivalence cast on certain incarnations of embodied victimhood and the untenability of messianism revealed to be nihilistic and contradictory by Agamben, the figure of the remnant, as material excess and psychological agitation seems to kick start the process of entropy in Useppe. LaCapra suggests that the key to understand trauma may be the remnant of experience that is 'what is it that escapes experience but still has an experiential effect?'<sup>375</sup> The trauma of indirectly witnessing these events leads him to shrink physically.<sup>376</sup> When he is in the final throes of his epilepsy which has been worsened by the exposure to relentless

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<sup>372</sup> Cited by Aaron Hillier, *The Disappearance of Literature: Blanchot, Agamben and the Writers of the No* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p.5.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>374</sup> Mecchia, p.142.

<sup>375</sup> LaCapra, *History in Transit*, p.5.

<sup>376</sup> To an extent Useppe could be considered a reverse model of Günther Grass's dwarf Oskar in *Die Blechtrommel*, who embodies the violence of the era of his birth and childhood where his body stays frozen.

exposure and a series of violence episodes, his mother Ida feels that Usepe has become even smaller ‘ebbe l’impressione che il corpo di Usepe, dormiente sulle sue ginocchia, si fosse fatto ancora più piccolo e minuto’ (641). He acts out the experiential residue that this indigestible encounter with the horrors of war sediments within his body. He is actually referred to as a remnant, as ‘sottosviluppato, malnutrito, povero *campione* senza valore’ (287, *emph. mine*); *campione*, meaning sample, mostly used to describe bits of fabric resonant with Mary Kessel’s reaction to the Holocaust survivors as ‘bits of humanity’ with which I opened the thesis. His mother Ida is also described as a detritus of war ‘da quando la Guerra mondiale era conclusa [...] il mondo degli adulti s’era di nuovo ritirato di [Ida], ributtandola sulle sabbie al suo destino come un detrito infinitesimo dopo una tempesta oceanica’ (483). The ‘transformation from innocent victim to bringer of universal hope’ is, for Pinfold, one of the most enacted conventions of literature about or featuring children.<sup>377</sup> In the narratives fissures and displacements of Morante’s narrative that simultaneously valorises and then negates the potential of the child to resist the hegemonic, faceless violence determining the lives of her characters, the messianic value of the animal and child become denatured, useless in their ethical applicability as the emphasis on the symbol of the remnant shows.

### **Adaptations, nesting, habitats: Creaturely refigurations of the home.**

The boundaries between experience and latent memory, human and animal are constantly challenged by the trauma of suffering inflicted by indigestible experiences of violence, pain or historical upheaval in Elsa Morante’s *La Storia*. Furthermore, human experience cannot be detached from environment, and the experience of violence and suffering often impact upon an individual’s relationship to the spaces in which these take place. The subject’s relationship to her space, how she constructs it and the demands it makes of her, may be indicative of degree of traumatisation which shifts the human into an animal mode of existence. I suggest here that an examination of space, and particularly post-war modes of dwelling, is one way of exploring the shifting boundary between human and animal to the extent that the way people interact and behave within their surroundings is an indicator of their adaptation to them; here spaces crystallise the marginalisation and victimisation felt upon the body as I showed in the previous section. Ginzburg suggests that space and unsettlement are key ways in which the human distinguishes itself from the animal:

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<sup>377</sup> Pinfold, p.58.



Non c'è pace per il figlio dell'uomo. Le volpi e i lupi hanno le loro tane, ma il figlio dell'uomo non ha dove posare il capo. La nostra generazione è una generazione di uomini. Non è una generazione di volpi e di lupi. Ciascuno di noi avrebbe molta voglia di posare il capo da qualche parte, ciascuno avrebbe voglia di una piccola tana asciutta e calda. Ma non c'è pace per i figli degli uomini.<sup>378</sup>

For Ginzburg, the search for a den is one of the main factors of post-war unsettlement experienced by the 'son of man', a generation radically destabilised by the experience of war and persecution. The marginality of the creature who destabilises the border between man and animal is mirrored in the hybrid quality of the post-war individual's mode of dwelling or unsettlement – evoking a discomfort with animal identification and creaturely adaptation. The uncanny liminality of the traumatised creature I describe in the previous section which dealt with the negotiation of the human/animal boundary in the embodiment of the suffering being also impacts upon the individual's relationship to space. The embodiment of trauma in which the human takes on inhuman form, or vacillates uncannily between human and animal echoes the way in which humans attempt to form a protective shield for themselves to counteract the vulnerability of exposure. In *La Storia*, there is a concern for spaces which I term habitats, such as nests, dens, dwelling places. The OED gives the following definitions for 'habitat':

The locality in which a plant or animal naturally grows or lives; habitation. Sometimes applied to the *geographical area* over which it extends, or the special locality to which it is confined; sometimes restricted to the particular *station* or spot in which a specimen is found; but chiefly used to indicate the kind of locality, as the sea-shore, rocky cliffs, chalk hills, or the like. (Emph. in original)

Thus, in the first instance, a habitat is a geographical location made of autarchic materials providing sustenance to a species. It is worth noting that habitats in the OED are exclusively designated for plants and animals whereas here the term conveys the liminality of animal and human modes of dwelling in the aftermath of exposure to traumatic violence. The second definition is more generic and encompasses the term 'den' which I also feel to be crucial to forms of dwelling after World War Two: 'more generally: habitation, dwelling-place.' I am interested in dens, nests and burrows as features of post-war habitats which are put together out of autarchic materials or remnants of destroyed structures after or during the war. OED definitions of dens, nests and burrows converge in two points; firstly, that they all connote dwelling-places or lairs of wild animals; secondly, they figuratively evoke shelter and places of safety, retreat or abode.

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<sup>378</sup> Ginzburg, 'Il figlio dell'uomo', p.69.

In his *La Poétique de l'Espace*, Bachelard devotes two chapters to nests and shells in order to explore the emotional impact of animal modes of dwelling on literature: 'Après avoir suivi les rêveries d'avoir habité ces lieux inhabitables, nous sommes revenus à des images qui demandent, pour que nous les vivions, que, comme dans les nids et les coquilles nous nous fassions tout-petits.'<sup>379</sup> The habitat may therefore be figured as an animal space to the creaturely human seeking to evade exposure. The habitat suggests primordial safety of the animal-like womb or nest, whose image provokes a desire for a return to origins; this causes man to live 'dans un au-delà des images humaines.'<sup>380</sup> A habitat does not exclude the possibility of becoming prey, but it also provides sufficient shelter to avoid predators. The use of space buffers against the exceptional levels of violence to which Morante's individuals become vulnerable.

War is first and foremost a conquest of territory, which is the first step towards the colonisation of institutions and ideologies. The presence of the enemy in a foreign land, the unwelcome physical or political intrusion of a foreign presence radically shifts the spatial parameters of the homeland as spaces and landscapes also become actors in the struggle for liberation or occupation. As Michel de Certeau notes, the negotiation of the spaces of the city and everyday practices 'are tactical in character' due to the 'immemorial intelligence displayed in the tricks and imitations of plants and fishes. From the depths of the oceans to the streets of the modern megalopolis there is a continuity and permanence in these tactics.'<sup>381</sup> The setting of *La Storia* in wartime Rome is particularly salient here. In her essay on the Renaissance painter Fra Angelico, Morante states that her writing stems from her experience of the ruined city: 'La povera mia (nostra) lingua materna è cresciuta nella fabbrica deformante delle città degradate, fra le lotte evasive dei meccanismi schiavistici, e le ripugnanti, continue tentazioni della bruttezza.'<sup>382</sup> The characters' lives are defined by their relationship to their urban environment which on the one hand threatens them and on the other shelters them from the ravages of war.

From the commute to work (Ida's walk through Rome on her way to the school where she teaches), institutional rhythms (the demographic office - 'anagrafe' – is mentioned as are

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<sup>379</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *La Poétique de L'espace* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), p.19.

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*, p.45.

<sup>381</sup> Michel de Certeau cited by Lacapra 2009, p.52.

<sup>382</sup> Elsa Morante, 'Angelico: il beato propagandista del paradiso' [1970]. Introduction to a collection of the work of Renaissance artist Fra Angelico. <http://www.bartolomeodimonaco.it/online/?p=1156> –[Accessed 29 September 2011]

the regulated hours of the school day: Ida is raped by Günther as she returns in the early afternoon from teaching), and transport.<sup>383</sup> Indeed, Usepe's first and final journeys in the novel are made by tram, 'E d'un tratto [a Ida] si ripresentò alla mente il primo viaggio che aveva fatto con lui sul tram, portandosela a casa appena nato dal quartiere di San Giovanni' (641). The city setting also allows Morante to portray a tableau of the morass of human beings abandoned to their fate in wartime Rome. As Italian troops head to the foothills to conquer the invading allies, who move in from the neighbouring countryside and from the air, the unsafe city centre and its unsalubrious quarters marked by food and power shortages are left to those who have nowhere else to go. As most men of combat age go to war, the inner city is left to women, children, the old, the infirm and the animals who live under destitute conditions: 'Ma alla fine dentro la città isolate, saccheggiate e stretta d'assedio, la vera padrona era la fame' (326). Thus, the urban fabric is transformed by warfare in *La Storia* which echoes the Italian cityscapes that distinguished Italian neorealist films of the immediate post-war period. Indeed, *La Storia* is a city novel, focussing on the various areas of Rome as a major arena in the conquest for Italy in the years from 1941-1945 as well as a crucial locus of reparation and reflection after the end of the war; this chimes with Carlo Levi's mobilisation of creaturely spaces in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* which I discussed in the previous chapter.

*La Storia* is also one of the only novels that dramatises the Allied bombing of the working class quarter of San Lorenzo, a subject that remained taboo in academic, political and public discourse for several decades following the war.<sup>384</sup> Hence, the city of Rome is a privileged arena for the observation of the devastating effects of war, nowhere else are the effects of war on an architectural, demographic and navigable level so apparent, plus the degradation of the heart of the Italian *polis* evinces the inherent victimisation of Italy as a result of its damaged cities and disenfranchised creaturely citizens. For Sebald, the legacy of the aerial war is a fundamentally creaturely one in that it threatens human vitality: 'wie lange die Menschen, bis weit in die Nachkriegszeit hinein, konfrontiert geblieben sind mit ihren realen jedes positive Lebensgefühl erstickenden Folgen.'<sup>385</sup> In his discussion of the function of the

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<sup>383</sup> The 'anagrafe' is the spatial location of Ida's secret Jewish identity: 'il suo segreto razziale pareva sepolto, una volta per tutte negli archivi dell'Anagrafe.' (58)

<sup>384</sup> Alessandro Portelli is one of the first historians to lift the taboo on Allied Bombing in Italy in his 1999 study *L'Ordine è già stato eseguito: Roma, le fosse Ardeatine, la memoria* (Roma: Donzelli, 1999). In his chapter on the destruction of San Lorenzo, his collection of oral history interviews from survivors of the air raids and their family members, Portelli reveals the anxiety of those affected who were eager not to denounce the Allied bombings, blaming the Germans instead for the British Blitz which brought on the Roman air raids. Hence, at the time of Elsa Morante's *La Storia* which coincided with Cold War memory contests, the story of the Roman bombings were taboo and still a hotly contested moment of Italian Second World War history.

<sup>385</sup> W.G. Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2001), p.12.

city in Italian neorealist cinema, M.P. Shiel suggests that cities ‘would speak more powerfully than their rural counterparts to the Italian and international experience of war as a cataclysm of physical destruction and rebuilding.’<sup>386</sup> Furthermore, *La Storia* evokes the affective impact of the aerial war which devastated Europe. For example, the German soldier Günther dies in an aerial attack on his convoy as he heads towards Africa (74), and Ida’s flat is shelled in 1943 which marks the beginning of her nomadic existence with baby Useppe.

The aerial attack on the family apartment forces Ida to manipulate the space of the city in order to survive. Sebald, in his discussion of aerial bombings during World War II, links the unprecedented violence and destruction of the ‘Luftkrieg’ to a moment of unbridled energy, which enabled citizens to reinstate a semblance of normal life. The author confirms the ‘schier unglaubliche Energie, mit der man sich nach einem Angriff sogleich an die Wiederherstellung einigermaßen praktikabler Verhältnisse machte.’<sup>387</sup> The energy deployed in order to make life functional is likened to an animal strategy of adaptation in *La Storia*: with the onset of total war in 1942, Ida prepares for battle ‘come una gatta di strada con gli orecchi bassi’ (126) which acts as a physical warning to others to stay away. She cannot afford to use the black market, so she is described as ensuring her survival through instinctual energies: she becomes a ‘cacciatrice’, a hunter, engaged in ‘la sua guerra privata per la sopravvivenza, che doveva svilupparsi in seguito, sempre più feroce’ (127). In order to provide food for her growing son, she goes hunting for private lessons in return for food, which the narrator describes as a primitive struggle: ‘queste sue giornate di cacciatrice, riducendola a uno stato di lotta primitiva, la distraevano da tutte le altre ansie diurne’ (127). Although she continues to use her profession, she is unable to step outside her internalised modes of behaviour, and uses her training as a primary school teacher functionally, as a tool to gain food, rather than being able to use her mental faculties to engage in more lucrative and inventive strategies.<sup>388</sup> Nesting belongs to this adaptive strategy which testifies to what Bachelard has called the ‘active cushioning’ [‘un étrange blotissement, un blotissement actif ... dans une activité qui travaille physiquement.’] which characterises the nest which is not stumbled upon, but created and pieced together out

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<sup>386</sup> Mark Shiel, *Neorealism: Rebuilding the Cinematic City* (London: Wallflower, 2006), p.16.

<sup>387</sup> W.G. Sebald, *Ibid.*

<sup>388</sup> Karl Schlögel cites *Skizzen aus Litauen*, a 1916 Russian textbook on the experience of war as harnessing animal energy and instinct: ‘aber wie viele haben draußen im Kriege wieder ihre Augen spitzen müssen wie die Tiere des Waldes [...] Ja, selbst bei Nacht glat es oft helllichtig wie die Eulen zu sein und scharfhörig dazu wie der Iltis’, in *Im Raum lesen wir die Zeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2003), p.108:

of remnant materials, just as the shelter at Pietralata becomes the mother and son's home for months.<sup>389</sup>

The cityscape that Ida delights in after giving birth to Usepe with its belltowers and summer heat has turned into an apocalyptic ruin, populated by throngs of half-dead war victims:

Roma rese l'aspetto di certe metropolis indiani dove solo gli avvoltoi si nutrono a sazietà e non esiste nessun censimento dei vivi e dei morti. Una moltitudine si sbandati e mendicanti, cacciati dai loro paesi distrutti, bivaccava sui gradini delle chiese [...] e nei grandi parchi pubblici pascolavano pecore e vacche denutrite sfuggite alle bombe. (324)

This description is a chilling contrast to Nino's boisterous optimism when he comments that it would not matter if Rome was bombed because the only structures of any value in the city are its ruins: 'su Roma, poco male se ci cascavano le bombe: visto che il massimo valore di Roma erano le rovine, Colosseo, Foro Traiano ecc' (164). As the old city centre becomes an apocalyptic wasteland, Ida and Usepe are pushed out to a ruined shelter in Pietralata in the outskirts of Rome. Pietralata is 'villaggio di esclusi' village for the marginalised (179), a 'zona franca e fuori legge' (179).

Pietralata era una zona sterile di campagna all'estrema periferia di Roma, dove il regime fascista aveva istituito qualche anno prima una sorta di villaggio di esclusi. [...] Lo stesso regime aveva provveduto frettolosamente a fabbricare per loro, con materiali autarchici, questo nuovo quartiere, composto di alloggi rudimentari fatti in serie, i quali adesso, benché recenti, apparivano già decrepiti e impudriditi. (179)

*I Mille*, the numerous family who take Ida and Usepe in, also emblematised the remarkable tenacity of animals and human in adverse conditions and Della Colletta illuminatingly refers to them as 'a chaotic and promiscuous amalgam of heterogeneous human beings, emblematic of all that the regime sought to erase and conceal.'<sup>390</sup>

It may be that the preoccupation with shelter after the Second World War comes to replace the fascination with home and homeland (*Heimat*) which, as Heidi Schlipphacke shows, become contaminated with their associations with dominant power structures harking back to the Third Reich in Austrian and German literature: 'the space of the scene of trauma, the tainted *Heimat*, is colored by the guilt of the fathers, and a nostalgic longing for the tainted home is

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<sup>389</sup> Bachelard, p.101.

<sup>390</sup> Della Colletta, p.141.

possible only in an alienated form.’<sup>391</sup> Creaturely notions of habitat and shelter supersede the containment of national identity, which has become toxic through its association with fascism and war. Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts’ poetry of Britain’s ‘Edgelands’ explore the phenomenon of the den and ask whether the disintegration of the British post-war landscape is particularly propitious to the creation of dens, due to the ubiquity of material and the need to create shelters: ‘Could it be that the English post-war edgelands saw a Golden Age of den-building?’<sup>392</sup> Thus, the uncanny liminality of post-traumatic human embodiment is echoed in the discomfort with the notion of home and its replacement with more precarious forms of shelter and social interaction. In my analysis of the texts by Reichart and Mitgutsch that follow, the ‘home’, locus of the mother, is where trauma of historical violence is most felt: the home symbolises the continuity between public and private where institutionalised forms of violence can be administered against those dwelling at home. Karl Schlögel in *Im Raum lesen wir die Zeit*, suggests that the whole vocabulary of space had been contaminated after Nazism which practically made it taboo in the post-war years: ‘Die Schreckensnamen der europäischen Geschichte sind keine Metaphern, sondern Namen für Orte, an denen Europa zugrunde ging oder wieder auferstand.’<sup>393</sup> The Heimat’s double identity as both a cradle of identity and a political, national concept provokes a great deal of anxiety after World War Two.

Yet within this panorama of destruction and destitution, Morante still carves a space for the possibility of home which is in fact an animal instinct to nest, and create shelters. Morante’s conception of home is an animal one. The word *tana* (meaning ‘den’, or ‘lair’) recurs on several occasions to describe a whole range of habitats, from Ida’s one-room apartment in the working-class area of San Lorenzo, to the bed where she gives birth to Useppe, to the ruined shelter where she and Useppe spend the months following the destruction of their home. Yet at the most basic instinctual level, the notion of home is epitomised by the Jewish ghetto which Ida sees as her ‘den’. In fact, as soon as her contractions start, she heads straight to the washerwoman’s apartment to give birth: The Ghetto is the primordial ‘tana’ to which Ida is drawn instinctually: ‘Si sentiva attirata lì da un richiamo di dolcezza, quasi come l’odore di una stalla per un vitello, o quello di un suk per un’araba; e insieme da un impulso di necessità ossessiva, come di un pianeta gravitante intorno a una stella’ (93). The Ghetto promises her ‘laggiù in fondo, una stalla maternal, calda di respire animali e di grandi occhi non giudicanti,

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<sup>391</sup> Heidi M. Schlipphacke, *Nostalgia after Nazism: History, Home and Affect in German and Austrian Literature and Film* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2010), p.15.

<sup>392</sup> Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts, *Edgelands* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), p.38.

<sup>393</sup> Karl Schlögel, *Im Raum Lesen Wir die Zeit* (München: Carl Hanser, 2003), p.14.

solo pietosi' (238). This suggests that it is the isolated space for the marginalised and those considered 'racially' different within the hegemonic sphere of the city that she seeks, rather than to be surrounded with other Jews. As the fear of being persecuted for her racial identity grows by the day, the only place she feels comfortable is the Jewish ghetto, indicating that she wants to anchor her suffering in that of a marginalised people, but also a marginalised city location. For instance, the Jewish ghetto is seen as a suffering body which registers the violence done to its inhabitants: 'del quartiere del Ghetto, svuotato interamente di tutta carne giuda, non c'erano restate altro che lo scheletro' (237). In her meanderings through the ghetto, Ida herself into the typical image of the degraded Jewish victim by walking around without any stockings and a shaved head: 'adesso non portava più né calze né capello; e di recente, per praticità, s'era tagliata i capelli, i quali, così corti, le incoronavano la testa di un cespuglietto cresciuto' (330). The dialectic between the Jewish body and its locatedness within the ghetto suggests a fluidity of body and city, of organism and habitat.

Morante's depiction of the primitive intimacy of the shelter in Pietralata and the nesting adaptation to a city in ruins echoes Henry Moore's 1940-1941 *Shelter Sketchbook* commissioned by the War Office. He depicts the shelter's 'intimate little touches': 'People who were obviously strangers to each other forming tight little intimate groups. [...] They were a bit like the chorus in a Greek drama telling us about the violence we don't actually witness.'<sup>394</sup> Criticised for their pessimistic depiction of London's dispossessed, Moore's sketches displayed in the National Gallery were praised by Keith Vaughan in 1943: 'I think these drawings are very moving because Moore has not withheld himself from the full impact of this strange and tragic situation, but going beyond the apparent, has tried to discover and express the human and enduring qualities which would ultimately triumph over it.'<sup>395</sup> Erich Neumann's analysis of Moore's chthonic, cloaked humanoid shelter-dwellers emphasised how Moore offered an insight into how war brought forth a new type of creature adapted to an archaic island of prehistoric life adapting to the barbarous wartime conditions of modern Europe:

In these *Shelter Drawings* Moore was given a unique opportunity to see his inner image of the archetype of the feminine as the sheltering cave in the earth realised all around him in actual fact. With the collapse of the modern civilised world, an archaic, primitive world of cave life suddenly appeared in its very

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<sup>394</sup> Henry Moore, 'Introduction' in Henry Moore, *A Shelter Sketchbook* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1988), pp.5-13, p.9.

<sup>395</sup> Cited by Frances Carey, 'Commentary' in *Ibid.*, pp.14-20, p.19.

midst, and the long-forgotten situation of human beings crawling for shelter, like worms, into the womb of the earth and being swallowed in its abysses became all too typical reality.<sup>396</sup>

In her description of nesting and post-war dwelling, Morante testifies to a creaturely adaptability demanded of those exposed to the violence of war; equally, her characters' propensity to nest is indicative of a type of traumatising revealing a manic, urgent, visceral adaption to one's surroundings that I call creaturely.

### **Conclusion: Morante's Creatural Realism**

By paying attention to the embodiments and adaptations of the human and non-human body in the experience of history, Morante enables a broad spectrum of historical subjects to be integrated into the engagement with the Second World War, aligned with Auerbach's concern for creatural realism outlined in his seminal work *Mimesis*. Morante's messianic figuration of Usepe, with his innocent and joyous potential for partaking in a heavenly vision of utopia which ultimately remains unfulfilled echoes Auerbach's view that Western literature is anchored within a transition of Christian anthropology whereby 'all men are equal before death, before creatural decay, before God'; 'as a part of nature, man rejoices in his breathing life, his bodily functions, and his intellectual powers, and like nature's other creatures, he suffers natural dissolution.'<sup>397</sup> Morante's work, like Rabelais and Dante's according to Auerbach, partakes in 'that horror at man's transitoriness.'<sup>398</sup> *La Storia* reflects on real events, true suffering and real degradation at the heart of the interrogation of our creaturely existence and embodied integrity in the aftermath of mass genocide and total war, so the reader echoes Auerbach's discomfort about the passivity this worldview entails: 'it shows no will whatever to make this world any different to what it is.'<sup>399</sup> The novel dramatizes a problematic collapse of agency associated with the juxtaposition of animality and victimhood to signify disempowered passivity. This is rooted in Morante's extreme suspicion of any kind of political agency, linked to her generalisation of power as fascism 'il fascismo di oggi, un potere senza volto, un potere che è insieme politico e intellettuale.'<sup>400</sup> Yet, her affirmation that the faceless power of history subjugates its creaturely victims reveals complex and disavowed anxieties

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<sup>396</sup> Cited by Lyndsey Stonebridge, 'Bombs, birth and trauma: Henry Moore and D.W. Winnicott's prehistory fragments' in *Henry Moore: Critical Essays*, ed. by Jake Beckett and Fiona Russell (London: Ashgate, 2003), pp.107-124, p.111.

<sup>397</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, tr. by Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p.249, 277.

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*, p.249.

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid.*, p.258.

<sup>400</sup> Graziella Bernabò, *Come leggere La Storia di Elsa Morante* (Milano: Mursia, 1991), p.125.



relating to Italian national identity in the course and aftermath of the Second World War, thanks to the fruitful comparison of Morante's ethics of affect and Liesmann's notion of the 'good person' morality which has conditioned a mythology and morality of acritical approaches to suffering and violence. Nevertheless, *La Storia* is a searing portrait of war as 'the felt fact of aliveness'<sup>401</sup> which should encourage the reader to approach the text with a sense of her own endangered materiality and with a mindfulness of the realness of the suffering of others, albeit with a renewed alertness for how the creaturely collapses victimhood and suffering as an unquestioned result of passivising traumatic embodiment.

In the next section, I move on to explore two novels by Elisabeth Reichart and Anna Mitgutsch whose texts deal more explicitly with the anxiety surrounding the remembrance of the past and how its legacy is transmitted, as opposed to the latency of historical consciousness and its disavowal in the case of Bernhard and Levi. In these works, the moral failures of Nazism and structural fascism as well as the disappointments of lives interrupted by war create a climate in which human beings are possessed by a historical inheritance which defines their material form, as well as their interactions with others. At odds with the bourgeois faith in the idealised enlightenment human subject, the compulsive way in which history surfaces at a bodily level is experienced as a shameful symptom of exposure to and fixation on the violence characteristic of the years of war and disorder that characterised the war years and the immediate postwar period. The characters' perceived helplessness dramatizes how history interpellates individual agency as the preliminary investigation of Thomas Bernhard and Carlo Levi's texts indicated.

As we shall see, the creaturely resonance of recent history is borne across generations thanks to the maternal transmission of a toxic legacy rooted in the Nazi dictatorship and the coercion of fascism: maternal generation shapes the way in which the characters feel and situate themselves with respect to a historical inheritance to which they are bound physically and psychically. An emphasis on the suffering of the body, and its powerlessness to intervene in its surroundings, correlates with the proliferation of animal symbolism to denote powerlessness and a lack of agency. The body as creature, created matter, emphasises the disgusting, disempowering 'fleshy' legacy of a traumatic past which is pulled between the passivity and vulnerability of maternal generation and the necessity to shape one's own material destiny.

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<sup>401</sup> Santner, 2012, p. 115.

### **Chapter Three: The Transmission of History: Generations and Embodiment in Elisabeth Reichart's *Februarschatten* and Anna Mitgutsch's *Die Züchtigung*.**

*Ich bin auch ein Täter geworden. Zum Opfer erzogen. Von Dir. Ich bin einer geworden. Wie Du.*<sup>402</sup>

*L'inferno non è per peccatori, non è una fantasmagoria in cui ficcare amici e nemici, è per vittime innocente l'inferno. Ardevano solo corpi inermi, innocenti, indifesi.*<sup>403</sup>

#### **Introduction: Generation and Transmission**

Drawn from his 1989 novella *Aus* in which a son negotiates his upbringing in rural Austria by a tyrannically violent father, Hotschnig's reflection on generation and the embodied legacies of victimhood and violence act as a useful framework to this chapter. Giorgio Pressburger's exploration of the afterlife of the past in his vast *Nel Regno Oscuro* adds to Hotschnig's insight an equation of victimhood and bodily abjection, a sense of creaturely exposure that reverberates long into the aftermath of the experience of violence. Firstly, generation means 'the action or process of bringing something into existence', and thus refers to the process of creating creatures. Secondly, the OED defines generation as 'a collective, with implication of shared cultural and social attitudes.' Hence, in my overall analysis of the conflation of creatureliness, victimhood and the traumatic reverberations of the Second World War, the concept of generation not only encompasses the physical creation of bodies within given social, cultural and political circumstances but equally the transmission and reckoning with legacies across a given period, which can be creatively reconfigured or compulsively repeated. As Luisa Passerini notes in her study of totalitarianism 'it is not by chance that the issue of generations, biological as well as political, and of transmission of memory between them is such a crucial one.'<sup>404</sup> Here though, generation will signify the modality whereby historical legacies, social conditioning and intersubjective dynamics are engendered, embodied and engendered; unlike Passerini, I see generation as a vector for attitudes and embodiments, but not memories. Generation is here an explicative key for the way in which the past is mobilised by the body within the family. As I argue throughout this chapter, the body acts as a repository for historical experience, a receiver for transmitted violence as well as a vehicle of legacies and attitudes towards the Nazi past. First as experience, then as narrative, Austria's

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<sup>402</sup> Alois Hotschnig, *Aus - Eine Art Glück* (Wien: Haymon, 2013), p.51.

<sup>403</sup> Giorgio Pressburger, *Nel Regno Oscuro* (Milano: Bompiani, 2008), p.56.

<sup>404</sup> Luisa Passerini, *Memory and Totalitarianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.12.

violent historical heritage is reconfigured and transmitted through a confrontation with maternal generation in Elisabeth Reichart's *Februarschatten* (1984) and Anna Mitgutsch's *Die Züchtigung* (1985).<sup>405</sup>

Furthermore, this idea of writing as a form of mothering, engendering creation, passes through a discussion of orality for both Reichart and Mitgutsch, a trope I consider as being crucial to the dynamic of generation and communication which I explore in this chapter. Natalia Ginzburg's analysis of writing as nourishing itself from the dreadful experiences of the past is salient here: 'è un mestiere che si nutre anche di cose orribili, mangia il meglio e il peggio della nostra vita, i nostri sentimenti cattivi come il buono fluiscono nel suo sangue. Si nutre e cresce in noi.'<sup>406</sup> Orality functions as a symbol of textual and historical transmission in both Reichart and Mitgutsch's texts, but whereas we shall see that a constantly deferred narrative orality is proposed by Reichart, Mitgutsch refers to a past that is engorged and rejected complicating the nourishing stereotype of the mother, a tension portrayed in *Die Züchtigung*. Oral and textual transmission, but also bulimia as symptomatic rejection and compulsive absorption of toxic past, that is speech acts and acts of eating, structure female experience in the two novels. In this way, generation as it emerges in these two novels has as much to do with historical consciousness as it does to do with modes of embodiment, where the mouth is a focal point.

Transmission will be a key notion for this chapter as it bears the sense of inscription and 'infection' whereby historical consciousness is inscribed on the female body, a carrier of historical experience. Bachmann sees this as the root of post-war subjectivity when she underlines: 'Die Veränderung, die das Ich erfahren hat, ist, dass es sich nicht mehr in der Geschichte aufhält, sondern dass sich neuerdings die Geschichte im Ich aufhält'<sup>407</sup> Moreover, transmission is a textual and oral practice that contains the dual notion of active communication, and passive 'infection.' Furthermore, Peter Gay notes the trope of transmission as infection as an explanatory paradigm for the hold of Nazism in Germany: 'in their search for the sources of Germany's mortal infection, German historians have identified such familiar social types as the authoritarian father or such long-lived habits as the political

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<sup>405</sup> Anna Waltraud Mitgutsch, *Die Züchtigung* (Munich: DTV, 1985); Elisabeth Reichart, *Februarschatten* (Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1984). All subsequent references in the text. All translations my own.

<sup>406</sup> Natalia Ginzburg, 'il mio mestiere', *Opere I* (Milano: Mondadori, 1986), pp.843-845, p.854: 'it is a profession that feed itself from bad things, it eats the best and the worst of our lives, our bad feelings and the good flow in its blood. It feeds itself and grows in us.'

<sup>407</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, 'Das schreibende Ich', *Werke 4* (Munich: Piper, 1978), pp.217-237, p.230: 'The change that the "I" has experienced ist hat it no longer resides in history but that history resides in it.'

passivity presumably inherited from Martin Luther's religious thought.'<sup>408</sup> Mitgutsch writes about the infectious zone of contact between writing and reality: 'Ich glaube, dass Schreiben immer ein Sich-Reiben an der Wirklichkeit ist, an der Gesellschaft, und ich glaube, dass in Österreich eine Enge herrscht ... die viel mehr diese Reibungsfläche bietet, an der man sich schreibend entflammt oder entzündet, sehr viel mehr als in einer offeneren und diffuseren Bundesrepublik' as Mitgutsch's statement underlines, writing is the infection provoked by a noxious exposure to Austrian reality.<sup>409</sup> The metaphor of the contaminated textual body (*entflammt oder entzündet*) through its exposure to Austria, underpins her vision of the visceral impact of society, relationships and one's cultural environment on the body and its representation. The passive notion of transmission, a creaturely inscription of the past onto the female body, an 'undergoing' of a toxic historical legacy, can therefore be productively reversed through an engagement with transmission as creative reckoning with a past endowed with new meaning beyond its victimising, entrapping effect.

*Februarschatten* and *Die Züchtigung's* concern with generation complicates the controversial notion of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* that has dominated post-war cultural and historical debates surrounding German and Austrian guilt in the Second World War and the Holocaust. Mitgutsch criticises the uneasy homogenisation of the past this term reflects 'Ich hasse das Wort '*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*'. Das kann man nie bewältigen.'<sup>410</sup> Mary Cosgrove and Anne Fuchs speak instead of 'memory contests' in reaction to the fixation on an unchanging past legacy:

memory contests put emphasis on a pluralistic memory culture which does not enshrine a particular normative understanding of the past but embraces the idea that individuals and groups advance and edit competing stories about themselves that forge their changing sense of identity. The notion of memory contests thus gives expression to the fact that memories always offer heavily edited versions of selves, groups and their worlds.<sup>411</sup>

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<sup>408</sup> Peter Gay, *Freud, Jews and Other Germans: Masters and Victims in Modernist culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p.4.

<sup>409</sup> Maria-Regina Kecht, 'Gespräch mit Anna Waltraud Mitgutsch' in *Women in German Yearbook* 8 (1992), pp.127-132, p.128: 'I think that writing is always to rub yourself against reality, against society, and I think that in Austria there is a constriction that allows for this friction surface upon upon which by writing, one sets flame to or sets on fire, much more than in an open and diffuse republic.'

<sup>410</sup> Kecht, p.130. For a critique of the unsuitability of the term '*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*' in the German context, see Peter Fritzsche, 'What exactly is *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*? Narrative and its insufficiency in postwar Germany' in *German Memory Contests: The quest for identity in literature, film and discourse since 1990*, ed. by Mary Cosgrove, Anne Fuchs and Georg Grote (London: Camden House, 2006), pp.25-41: 'One can never come to terms with that'

<sup>411</sup> Mary Cosgrove and Anne Fuchs, 'Introduction', *German Life and Letters* 59 (2006), pp.3-10, p.4.

Yet this definition of an engagement with legacies of the past still contains the problematic term ‘memory’ which encompasses a wide range of historical experience which is not related to cognitive remembering but rather a unified process of recalling the past. The word ‘edited’ here is particularly salient in that it reveals the shortcomings of memory but also the manipulations to which the past may be subjected – the subject of Mitgutsch’s Graz lectures entitled ‘Erinnern und Erfinden.’ ‘Memory’ should not acquire the status of a self-evident explanatory paradigm to explain the past, when in fact, memory can never be a given, object-related discourse, as it is so beholden to narrative choices and either voluntary or unconscious censorship.<sup>412</sup> Sigrid Weigel proposes the notion of generation which bypasses the issues of ‘Vergangenheitsbewältigung’ and ‘memory’, focussing instead on ‘divided knowledge’ through the pattern of generations:

the origin is not whole, homogeneous or uniform. Instead, a trace of divided knowledge that goes back to the diversity and incompatibility of historical experiences that is propagated in the memory of the descendants arises from the past events in which individuals were involved as perpetrators of crimes, as victims, collaborators, witnesses or merely as spectators. This trace of divided knowledge, which is often covered or hidden in discourse tends to become superimposed on the patterns of generation.<sup>413</sup>

The oral acts of silencing or speaking, ‘covering or hiding’, ‘superimposed on the pattern of generations’ become a way of engaging with the visceral and embodied traces of a past once-removed in a way that documents the past’s potential for ‘generation’, for the creation and transmission of a complex, embodied and codified historical consciousness. Long’s problematisation of generation argues that ‘the notion of a largely passive subject “dominated” and “shaped” by an unknown past implies a degree of unconscious identification [...] leaves little scope for ethical reflection’; following this, I examine here how the embodied practice of oral and physical transmission of the past may trouble how identifications with victims or perpetrators are formed. I also ask how ethical compassion for past suffering may accommodate competing and juxtaposed subject positions in relation to a toxic ever-present past.<sup>414</sup> By staging encounters between mothers and daughters, Reichart and Mitgutsch both allow for a reflection on the past based on the recovery of agency through an engagement with

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<sup>412</sup> Thus, I object to Marianne Hirsch’s moving analysis of ‘postmemory’. By stating that ‘postmemory’ connects ‘to its object or its source not through recollection but through imaginative reinvestment or creation’, Hirsch actually undermines a definition of postmemory as memory, but rather refigures it as narrative. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p.22.

<sup>413</sup> Sigrid Weigel, ‘Generation as a symbolic form: On the Genealogical Discourse of Memory since 1945’, *Germanic Review* 77:4 (January 2002), pp.264-277, p.265.

<sup>414</sup> J.J. Long, ‘Monica Maron’s *Pawels Briefe*: Photography, Narrative and the Claims of Postmemory’ in Cosgrove, Fuchs, Grote, pp.147-168, p.149.

the modes in which the past is transmitted and embodied. Robert Schindel locates an entire generation of critical authors whose literary engagement with the past had concrete cultural consequences: ‘es gibt eine Nachkriegsgeneration, die zwischen 1950 und 1960 geboren wurde, für die die ganze Auseinandersetzung mit der “scheußlichen Heimat Österreich” konstruktiv für die Literatur war, und für die 1986 noch ein zusätzlicher Schub war, um abzurechnen mit der Lebenslüge.’<sup>415</sup>

## Women and mothers in the Reich

Austrian literature following 1945 has dealt abundantly with the problem of the father who, for historian Paul Ginsborg, was the prime generational vector of authoritarian politics: he argues that ‘support for and [identification] with’ Nazi totalitarian practices hinged on the role of the ‘all-powerful’ father with ‘all-embracing authority.’<sup>416</sup> While authors such as Uwe Timm, Peter Schneider and Peter Henisch have considered the father as the locus of guilt and anxiety relating to the Nazi past, works by women such as Elfriede Jelinek’s *Lust*, Elisabeth Reichart’s *La Valse*, Brigitte Schwaiger’s *Lange Abwesenheit* among others have also staged the frightening trope of the authoritarian violent patriarch in the vein of Bachmann’s infamous depiction of Austria as ‘der Friedhof der ermordeten Töchter’ in her 1974 novel *Malina*.<sup>417</sup> Rita Morrien notes how the absence of mothers makes the father a resonant figure of Austrian post-war ‘Vergangenheitsbewältigung’:

Der Vater – nicht als reale, sondern als symbolische Größe wohlbemerkt – ist die Instanz, an die sich die schreibende Frau mit ihrem Begehren nach Anerkennung richtet, gegen deren Ablehnung sie anschreiben, und deren Sprachmonopol sie anfechten muß, will sie sich als eigenständiges weibliches Subjekt behaupten.<sup>418</sup>

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<sup>415</sup> Robert Schindel, ‘Es war eine gute Übergabe der Fackel’ in *Was wird das Ausland dazu sagen*, ed. by Gerhard Leitner, pp.46-54, p.48: ‘There is a postwar generation, which was born between 1950 and 1960 for whom an engagement with the horrible land of Austria was constructive for literature and which was only given an extra push after 1986 to reckon with the lie of the Austrian Republic.’

<sup>416</sup> Paul Ginsborg, *Family Politics: Domestic, Life, Devastation and Survival 1900-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p.393

<sup>417</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, *Malina* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main 1971), p.182: ‘the cemetery of murdered daughters.’ Reichart notes in *La Valse* that ‘Männer, die einen Krieg verloren, verhielten sich wie Sklavenschindler’. *La Valse* (Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1992), p.5.

<sup>418</sup> Rita Morrien, ‘Lebendig tot und oft begraben: Zur Absenz der Mutter bei Ingeborg Bachmann, Marlen Haushofer und Unica Zürn’ in *Mütter und Mutterlichkeit: Wandel und Wirksamkeit einer Phantasie in der deutschen Literatur* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1994), pp. 317-332, p.317: ‘The father – not as real but as symbol entity – is the figure to whom the writing woman directs her desire for recognition, against whose refusal she must write and whose monopoly of language she must take on, if she wants to be recognised as an independent feminine subject.’

For Mitgutsch and Reichart, the mother as a generative point of reference for authors reveals itself to be just as powerfully and symbolically more laden than that of the father. Indeed, Wiedmer's analysis of German authors' turn to the father may equally be applied to the position of daughters to their mothers in Mitgutsch and Reichart's novels seeking to reckon with a past whose legacy continues to radiate into the very subjectivity and embodied self of the female writer-daughter: 'Many of the authors of *Väterliteratur* performed a fragile balancing act as they try to recapture a sense of self through an interweaving of renunciation and responsibility, of kinship and rejection and of mourning and forgetting a parent who had been involved in atrocities.'<sup>419</sup> Mitgutsch's provocative formulation in *Die Züchtigung* confirms: 'wenn wir versuchen, uns zu definieren, wenn uns andere mit Worten zu fassen suchen, greifen wir auf unsere Mütter zurück' (133, 'If we want to define ourselves, if others wish to conceive us with words, we hark back to our mothers').

Motherhood in any discussion of the reverberations of the Third Reich is particularly salient as Jill Stephenson argues that 'where women's experience under Nazism was unusual, indeed unique was in the realm of reproduction, where "woman's" function as the mother of the species made her distinctively the focus of attention, pressure and in some cases both physical and mental cruelty.'<sup>420</sup> In Hitler's 8 September 1934 speech in Nuremberg, he made the well-known comparison of how 'the small world', that of the home and family, was of essential importance to 'the large world', that of politics and ideology: 'the large world cannot survive if the small world is unstable. Providence has entrusted women with the care of this, her very own world, and only upon it can man's world be fashioned and constructed.'<sup>421</sup> In addition, Stephenson notes Austrian women's 'disproportionate enthusiasm for the DFW [Deutsches Frauenwerk]' which saw its membership grow by nearly 300,000 in the weeks following the *Anschluss*. The Frauenwerk, under the onus of Gertrud Scholtz-Klink, Hitler's *Reichsfrauenführerin*, 'reminded women to educate children to think in "the National Socialist way" but also to bear more children.'<sup>422</sup> Atina Grossman's 1991 article 'Feminist Debates about Women and National Socialism' posits that in the late 1980s, while the *Historikerstreit* about the nature of National Socialism among male historians began to die down, a more furious battle was being waged by female historians about the nature of women's participation

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<sup>419</sup> Caroline Alice Wiedmer, *The Claims of Memory: Representations of the Holocaust in Contemporary Germany and France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp.80-81.

<sup>420</sup> Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany* (London: Routledge, 2013), p.5.

<sup>421</sup> Cited by Stephenson, p.142.

<sup>422</sup> Stephenson, p.90-91.

in the Third Reich, which often boiled down to the mobilization of motherhood by the Nazis.<sup>423</sup> Claudia Koonz's *Mothers in the Fatherland* argued that women were as much complicit in the murderous political dictatorship as men despite 'their adherence to domestic and maternal values associated with a politically indifferent female separate sphere.'<sup>424</sup> For Koonz, 'women, no less than men, destroyed ethical vision, debased human traditions, and rendered decent people helpless.'<sup>425</sup> Gisela Bock's book on forced sterilisation, on the other hand, notes how sterilisation policy defined a profound anti-natalism in Nazi Germany 'where racism and sexism have a manifold and complex relationship', which threatened the social and biological identity of women as mothers, making maternal figures ambiguous heirs of the Third Reich's reproductive politics.<sup>426</sup> This complexity is noted in Grossmann's plea for a revision of the 'counterproductive and misleading' victim/perpetrator paradigm which Reese and Sache lay out in their 'Bilanz' on the current debates about motherhood and gender roles in Nazi Germany.<sup>427</sup>

In my subsequent analyses of the two novels I am mindful of the dangers of 'freezing motherhood into a fixed, ahistorical category [which] also obscures the diverse and changing needs of women as workers and reproductive beings in a multicultural society': I will avoid these by examining how the notion of generation, implies a dynamic and porous maternal body accompanying a feminine subjectivity undergoing permanent historical conditioning and creaturely configuration.<sup>428</sup> My discussion of the creaturely here will invoke the body's problematic receptivity to historically conditioned violence.

### **The body's receptivity to historical violence**

For Anat Pick, following Simone Weil, human passivity to the manipulations of institution and intersubjective violence is the foundation of ethics. In an interview, she notes the difference between 'creaturely vulnerability and the idea of animals as supreme victims

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<sup>423</sup> Anita Grossmann, 'Feminist debates about women and national socialism' in *Gender and History* Vol.3, No.3 (Autumn 1991), pp.350-358.

<sup>424</sup> *Ibid.*, p.351.

<sup>425</sup> Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland. Women, the Family and Nazi Politics* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1987), p.17.

<sup>426</sup> Gisela Bock, 'Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany: Motherhood, Compulsory Sterilisation and the State', *Signs* 8:3 (1983), p.400-421, p.403.

<sup>427</sup> *ibid.*, p.356. Dagmar Reese, Carole Sachse, 'Frauenforschung und Nationalsozialismus: Eine Bilanz' in *TöchterFragen: NS-Frauen Geschichte*, ed. by Lerke Gravenhorst and Carmen Tatschmurat (Freiburg: Verlag Traute Hensch, 1990), pp.73-106.

<sup>428</sup> Janice Doane and Devon Hodges, *From Klein to Kristeva: Psychoanalytic Feminism and the Search for the Good Enough Mother* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p.29



who lack agency and power’; though it is difficult to see how she moves beyond the potential for victimisation and suffering and the abandonment of agency in the face of power in this analysis.<sup>429</sup> With two novels that see the body as a primary carrier of historical significance, both writers counter the ethics of creaturely vulnerability that Anat Pick defines in her *Creaturely Poetics*, as the vulnerability of the body to historical violence is not enough of a justification of an ethical stance as Pick’s interpretation of Weil disconnects an ethics of compassion from one of agency. As I will show in this chapter, Reichart and Mitgutsch’s engagement with notions of creation as maternal generation as well as their confrontation with the creaturely, enable a reconfiguration of historical agency through a revelation and disavowal of a vicarious identification with the creature as victim. Here, I build on Renata Cornejo’s illuminating analysis of the works of Reichart, Jelinek and Mitgutsch which she interprets as feminist efforts to recuperate a viable form of self-expression. According to Cornejo ‘die Konstitution des weiblichen Ich erfolgt durch die Wiedergewinnung und „Verschriftlichung“ der Leerstellen, an denen die Verschränkung der individuellen und historisch-gesellschaftlichen Versäumnisse sichtbar wird.’<sup>430</sup> The body and its creaturely responses to being created and inscribed by its exposure to history also speaks where the failure of self-expression in discursive terms becomes apparent. This chapter seeks to determine the ways in which victimhood is embodied and corporeally as a creaturely historically-determined symptom, revealing the tenacity of the emotional (rather than rational-cognitive) attachment to victimhood. Indeed, the ‘Lebenslüge’ was well on the way to extinction by 1985: ‘Mit der Waldheim-Affäre ist sozusagen auf der politischen Ebene mit der österreichischen Lebenslüge Schluß gewesen.’<sup>431</sup> By pinpointing how the ‘post-war’ body bears traces of past authoritarianism, how the generation of the ‘Lebenslüge’ confronts their heirs who dare to problematise and debunk the political agendas that have legitimised the perpetuation of violence and abuse of power in Austria, these texts are an important landmark in confrontations with Austrian national identity.

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<sup>429</sup> Anat Pick, <http://www.cup.columbia.edu/static/pick-interview>. Last Accessed: 11 January 2012.

<sup>430</sup> Renata Cornejo, *Das Dilemma des weiblichen Ich* (Wien: Praesens, 2006), p.69: ‘the constitution of the female “I” succeeds by winning back and translating the lacunae into language, the lacuna that make the limitations of the individual and missed opportunities in history and society obvious.’

<sup>431</sup> Schindel, p.48: ‘With the Waldheim affair the Austrian vital lie came to an end on a political level.’

## Die Züchtigung - Formative violence: the corporeal legacy of childhood in the Third Reich

‘War deine Mutter so wie du[?]’ (7: ‘Was your mother like you?’) is the opening question of Mitgutsch’s *Die Züchtigung*. Asking the narrator, Vera, is her young daughter who stares back at her in the mirror. The narrator’s own daughter’s question in front of the mirror brings three generations of women into compresence before the reader, prompting Vera to engage with the legacy of her mother ‘aus vielen Jahren Schweigen gerissen’ (7: ‘ripped out of many years of silence’). Anna Mitgutsch, born on 2 October 1948, was quick to retort to those seeking autobiographical elements in *Die Züchtigung*, that it was ‘ein politisches Buch’, the first of her ‘Gesellschaftsbücher’, of which the second is her novel *Ausgrenzung* (1989).<sup>432</sup> Also, Mitgutsch was keen not to be seen as an exponent of ‘Frauenliteratur’ which she saw as ‘eine Unschädlichmachung, eine Abschiebung’ (‘a neutralisation, a pushing aside’), indicating a cultural climate in which such labels acted ‘zur Waffe gegen schreibende Frauen’, in climate where her novels of family exploration and the legacies of exclusion, violence and trauma were labelled ‘Endlose Schreiben über Gefühle: Das düstere Dickicht der Neurosen’ or ‘Zutritt nur für Frauen’ by conservative critics.<sup>433</sup> In her Graz lectures on poetry, published in 1999 with the title *Erinnern und Erfinden*, Mitgutsch states that memory is the bedrock of her authorial project and she explicitly underlines its relationship to the body and to the literary image. The author sees the theme of *Die Züchtigung* as ‘das Thema der Verkettung von Generationen und der Weitergabe von Zwängen, Charakterzügen bzw. den Grenzen der Möglichkeit, sich von der Prägung in der Kindheit zu befreien.’<sup>434</sup> She sees silence and speaking as being the two poles between which the novel veers as she states in the following analysis:

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Zudem begann mit der Gegenüberstellung von “Schweigen” und “Reden”, die Grenzüberschreitung des Schweigens, nicht nur über die tote Großmutter, sondern über die Hintergründe einer spezifischen

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<sup>432</sup> Kecht, p.129

<sup>433</sup> Anna Mitgutsch, ‘Zum Literaturbetrieb in Österreich’ in Gerhard Leitner, pp.83-97(p.95). Herbert Lodron, ‘Endloses Schreiben über Gefühle: Das düstere Dickicht der Neurosen’ (The endless writing about feelings: the sinister glut of neuroses), *Die Presse* 18 October 1986; Jürgen Jakobs, ‘Zutritt nur für Frauen. Das Roman *das andere Gesicht* von Waltraud Anna Mitgutsch.’, *NNZ*, 16 September 1986.

<sup>434</sup> Anna Mitgutsch, ‘Exkurs: Romananfänge’ in Anna Mitgutsch, *Erinnern und Erfinden: Grazer Literaturvorlesungen* (Graz: Droschl, 1999), pp.145-156(p.147): ‘The theme of the chain of generations and the transmission of drives, characteristics and limits of the possibility to liberate oneself from childhood.’

Prägung, die nicht individuelle und zufällig ist, sondern die Prägung einer Gesellschaft, einer jeweiligen Gesellschaft.<sup>435</sup>

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I see 'Prägung' as a crucial term in Mitgutsch's work: 'Prägung' is as much a physical form of determination as it is a psychological notion (in the sense of formation, or shaping of the mind). Mitgutsch states plainly that this 'minting' of her characters is not individual, meaning that they stand for wider type of physical shaping in Austrian society of the time, nor it is 'zufällig', alleatory, rather this 'spezifische Prägung' is time-bound, willed and constructed to match the systemic violence that Mitgutsch diagnoses in the chain of relationships and generations she presents us with in her novel. With the notion of 'spezifische Prägung' which is supra-individual and planned, not random, Mitgutsch encapsulates how Vera, the first-person narrator of the book, is both a victim of this willed physical and psychological moulding, but risks complicity with this systemic violence in her own role as a mother. With her concern for 'Prägung', the profoundly conservative idea of the mother as a fixed myth of origin can be destabilised in the dynamic intergenerational exchange at the heart of *Die Züchtigung*. The notion of Prägung therefore underlies the creative implications of one's embeddedness in history; for Christoph Ransmayr, the relation to history ist 'ein höchst dynamisches, was auch wächst.'<sup>436</sup> Barbara Kosta offers a general interpretation of mothers' minting of their daughters through the Freudian lens of the 'return of the repressed', seeing generational transmission under the sign of victimhood:

Das Verdrängte kehr wieder [...] es prägt das soziale Geflecht und findet noch unmittelbar im Leben des Kindes Ausdruck, durch das es von einer Generation zur anderen weitergegeben wird. Die Wiederkehr des Verdrängten im Leben der Töchter weist besonders auf eine durchlässige Grenze zwischen Müttern und Töchtern hin, die durch die Einschreibung tiefer emotionalen Wunden in den unschuldigen Körper der Tochter noch brüchiger ist.<sup>437</sup>

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<sup>435</sup> *Ibid.*: In addition, the opposition of silence and speech, the crossing over from speech into silence, not only thanks to the dead grandmother, but by dealing with the backgrounds of a particular formation, which is not individual and arbitrary, but rather the formation of a society, of a particular society.

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<sup>436</sup> Tommaso Sommadossi, 'Intervista con Robert Schindel e Christoph Ransmayr' in *Ibid.*, *Dal Genocidio all'oblio: Topografie della memoria nel romanzo austriaco contemporaneo* (Roma: Aracne, 2010), pp.171-181, p.173: 'a highly dynamic [one], that is increasing.'

<sup>437</sup> Barbara Kosta, 'Anerzogener Masochismus' in *Mütter-Töchter-Frauen: Weiblichkeitsbilder in der Literatur*, ed. by Helga Kraft and Elke Liebs (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1993), pp.243-265, p.244: 'the repressed returns [...] it shapes the social fabric and continues to find expression in the life of the child, whereby it may be transmitted from one generation to the next. The return of the repressed in the lives of daughters points to a particularly porous barrier between mothers and daughters, made all the more fragile by the inscription of deep emotional wounds on the innocent body of the daughter.'

Insofar as this novel posits the importance of the shaping influence of behavioural patterns within the family as well as the social and interpersonal dynamic that construct the subject in a given socio-historical context, *Die Züchtigung* expounds on how the individual can acquire historical agency within the bounds of her own ‘spezifische Prägung’, aiming toward ‘eine Suche nach den Hintergründen einer über Generationen [...] tradierten Haltung zur Gesellschaft und zur eigenen Rolle in dieser Gesellschaft dahinter.’<sup>438</sup> In my view the porous boundary of the mother and daughter does not automatically victimise the daughter, as Kosta remarks. Here, Mitgutsch evokes the notion of childhood and the past as a discomfiting embodied mould of the modern subject, and the object of her literary investigations therefore, is to examine how the chain can be broken, thereby empowering the literary subject to embody her imbrication in the past and in generations in a self-aware and meaningful way.

The story is told from the unstable subject position of Vera, who belongs to the ‘first’ generation of post-war Austrians, who narrates the origins of her mother’s cruelty towards her. Vera mediates between her mother Marie and her own daughter, reflecting on the legacy of violence and victimisation in which her mother was brought up and of which she feels a victim of herself. The trauma of wartime suffering is uncontained within this text, and collapses important historical nuances to the point where any kind of contemporaneity or contact with the geography or timeframe of wartime Austria seems to ineluctably categorise Mitgutsch’s figures as victims.

Die vielen Demütigungen von dreißig Jahren, ich hatte sie miterlebt, als seien sie mir zugefügt worden, mir der Achtjährigen, die wahrlos auf dem Sofa lag, während sie ihren angesammelten Haß über mich ergoß... bis ich weinte vor Schmerz und Wut. (7)<sup>439</sup>

The harsh rural upbringing of Marie, who was a teenager during the war years, is an important contributing factor to her own torture of her daughter in the years following the war (‘Das Schicksal der Mütter setzt sich in den Töchtern fort’, 10: ‘the fate of the mother lives on in the daughters.’). Physical violence is the foundation of Austrian child-rearing at the time, a theme that Mitgutsch returns to in an interview:

Für mich ist das schon ein Angelpunkt für eine Erziehung von ungeheurer Härte, von einer Erziehung, die dem heranwachsenden Menschen, dem Kind keinen Raum läßt, um Individuum zu werden. Dieses

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<sup>438</sup> *Ibid.* p. 148: ‘a search for the background of a generational attitude to society and of one’s own role in this society.’

<sup>439</sup> ‘The many humiliations over thirty years. I had lived through them, as though they had been inflicted upon me, on me, the eight-year old, who lay defenceless on the sofa while she poured her accumulated hatred over me... until I cried from pain and rage.’

totale Unterwerfen und Brechen eines Menschen im Namen der Ordnung, Pünktlichkeit, Sauberkeit und all dieser Werte, die man faschistoid bezeichnen kann.<sup>440</sup>

Such is the violence that permeates Marie's story that her tale of beatings, humiliation and exclusion seems to relativize any kind of historical subject position, and amasses her experience with those victims of Nazi persecution. With every blow, her physicality hardens to the harshness of her environment: 'nur jedesmal verharteten sich noch ein paar Muskeln in ihrem verschlossenen Gesicht' (94, 'every time a few more muscles hardened in her reserved face'). Her femininity is experienced as shameful ('je weiblicher dieser Körper wurde, desto mehr Scham empfand sie', 26: 'the more womanly this body became the more shame she felt'). Though Hanlin declares her experiences to be unexceptional given the harshness of rural life as 'an indication that this period of extraordinary violence simply was not remarkable compared to the brutishness of life under normal circumstances in the country,' substantial clues as to the atmosphere of fear, hardship and oppression following the *Anschluss* in a small village on the Czech border (15,30) reveal how intensely-historically bound Vera's narrative is.<sup>441</sup> The narrator notes how Marie picks up on the threat of concentration camp incarceration: 'Halt's Maul, sonst kommst ins KZ, hieß es, diese Angst hatte auch die Dörfer erreicht' (44: 'Shut up otherwise you'll end up in a camp, that's what was said; this fear had already reached the villages'). So, Vera associates her mother's violence to the historical circumstances that shaped her own cruel treatment during the war. Confronted with the devastation of war, Marie's own suffering is placed on a similar place to that of the concentration camp and bombing raid survivors she encounters in her village, poisoned by emotional abuse, crippled as a child and ravaged by hunger, Marie's childhood environment seems to be the antithesis to any sort of 'humanity': 'warum war sie mit Unmenschen umgeben?' (68: 'Why was she surrounded by monsters?'). After expanding on her woes, an encounter with a concentration camp survivor is not a totally defamiliarising experience when she sees their 'unterernährte, hohlwangige

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<sup>440</sup> Kecht, p.130: 'For me that is already a cornerstone of an education of unbelievable severity, of an education which leaves the growing person, the child, no space to become an individual. This total submission and shattering of a person in the name of order, punctuality, cleanliness and all those values that one can call fascist.' In a 2014 discussion on the web forum parent.at, participant 'Lucy777's mother-in-law's (born in 1940) harsh parenting practices are referred to with reference to *Die Züchtigung*: 'Du darfst nicht vergessen, was damals standard war. das [sic] wird man nicht so schnell los. Lies mal Anna Mitgutschs "Die Züchtigung."' (you mustn't forget what was standard at the time. One doesn't get rid of that so quickly. Read Mitgutsch's *Die Züchtigung*'): <http://www.parents.at/forum/showthread.php?p=14287145> (Accessed: 12 December 2015)

<sup>441</sup> Todd C. Hanlin, *Beyond Vienna: Contemporary Literature from the Austrian Provinces* (Riverside: Ariadne, 2008), p.103; Josef Ippers notes that the violence underlying Nazi propaganda and education did not provoke a sense of shock in children but rather became 'die Normalität, in die sie [meine Generation] hineingeboren, in der sie aufgewachsen, für die sie erzogen war,' in *Niemand'sland: Kindheitserinnerungen an die Jahre 1945 bis 1949*, ed. by Heinrich Böll (Münich 1988), p.113.

Gestalten, die apathetisch vor sich hindösten, in denen Augen Hunger stand, wenn sie Kraft aufbrachten, sie zu öffnen' (70: 'undernourished, hollow-cheeked figures, that apathetically tumbled about, with hunger in their eyes, if they could muster the courage to open them.')

Similarly, her betrothed returns from the war in the same condition: 'verhungert als sie, seine Augen waren groß und glasig, seine Lippen zu voll in dem ausgezehrten Gesicht' (72: 'more starved than she was; his eyes were big and glassy; his lips too full in his ravaged face'). Marie's indifference to her encounter with the victims of the Third Reich stems from her own feeling of passive victimisation by the war and its aftermath: '[sie hatte] nichts dafür gekonnt und [wurde] trotzdem bestraft mit Hunger, Geldentwertung, zerbombten Städten und Besatzungssoldaten' (54: 'she could do nothing about it and was still punished with hunger, inflation, bombed cities and occupying soldiers'). As Pinfold underlines in her illuminating study of childhood during the Third Reich, 'a realistic depiction of a child growing up in this era will tend to show it identifying itself with the value system of the time rather than coming to its society with the fresh eyes of the outsider.'<sup>442</sup>

Though Marie's wartime experience chimes with Pinfold's notion of the child showing 'corruption without necessarily incurring guilt',<sup>443</sup> Vera later interprets her own unhappiness in the relationship with her mother in correlation with her mother's status as a perpetrator simply by virtue of having been part of the generation who were old enough to participate in the war:

[War sie] eine von denen, also die in Folterhallern und Konzentrationslagern ihre Karriere machte? Deshalb sage ich nicht, was ich weiß, was ich schon lange gewusst habe, dass sie eine von denen, die uns die Gänsehaut über den Rücken jagen und die Vorstellungskraft stocken lassen, wenn wir von ihnen in Geschichtsbüchern und Berichten lesen, eine von denen, die sich in allen Sparten der Folter auskennen. (135: Was she one of those who had made a career in the torture chambers and concentration camps? That's why I am not saying what I know, what I have known for a long time, that she is one of them, who gives us goosebumps and make the mind jar when we read about them in the history books; one of those people who are experts in all areas of torture.)

Mitgutsch's narrative pretends to hide behind the taboo of revealing the mothers' generation's participation in historical crimes and thus destroying the silence surrounding the war years ('deshalb sage ich nicht, was ich weiß', 135). However, rather than engaging with the implications of the previous generations' historical circumstances, namely the necessity to

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<sup>442</sup> Deborah Pinfold, *The Child's View of the Third Reich in German Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p.6.

<sup>443</sup> *Ibid.*, p.36.

balance real material hardship and suffering with the burden of historical consciousness and national identity, the narrator projects herself into the role of the victim of a toxic historical legacy. Though we know from the first part of the novel that the mother's own historical circumstances were inherently disempowering and exploitative, the daughter draws a parallel between her mother's violence and that of genocidal acts of criminality, revealing the narrator's self-identification on the side of history's victim. Vera refers to Marie's 'hilflose Faszination an allem, was die Macht hat, mich zu quälen' (133: a helpless fascination for everything that has the power to torment me) and refers to herself as a 'victim' of her own mother: 'sie hatte ihr verschwiegenes Opfer, das ihr hilflos und willig ausgeliefert war' (135: 'she had her silent victim who was helplessly and willingly at her mercy'). Vera refers to herself as 'das Opfer, das mit demütigen Augen das Folterwerkzeug aussuchte und die verwundbaren, kaum verheilten Narben entblößte' (153: 'the victim who with humble eyes looked for the instrument of torture and then bared the sensitive, barely-healed scars again'). In Marie's eyes, the dynamic transmission of violence rooted in her mother's cruel upbringing is the cause of her own torment at her mother's hands and her daughter's exposure to 'die Erbschaft der Selbstzerstörung' (155, 'legacy of self-destruction'): generation is therefore a mode of transmission, of perpetuation of violent societal and historically-conditioned norms inscribed upon the physicality of the women.<sup>444</sup> By casting herself as a victim, Vera is willingly abdicating any kind of historical perspective that would help her alleviate, even posthumously, her mother's rage. Indeed, she even refers to her experience of child abuse as a 'prolonged rape' ('fortgesetzte Vergewaltigung ... die ihre Tochter ausgeliefert war', 102) which does not redeem the mother's feelings of inadequacy and shame, meted out in her brutal treatment of her child, but rather reinforce the narrator and her mother's marginalisation by aligning her with the patriarchal structures that undermined her in the first place.

In this sense, Vera is Marie's creature. The narrator uses an animal metaphor as a cipher for her subjugation, once more mobilising the trope of the creaturely to convey a sense of disempowerment, exclusion and exposure. Her beatings, Vera notes 'begann[en] mit einem Blick, der mich in ein Ungeziefer wandelte' (96: 'they began with a look, that turned me into vermin.')

<sup>445</sup> As a creation Vera is Marie's 'stolzes Werk', made of 'formbare[m] Lehm',

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<sup>444</sup> The term 'self-destruction' here is double-edged: on the one hand, it implies that Vera and Marie have orchestrated their own downfall, but the fact that this is referred to as a legacy (*Erbschaft*) suggests an entropic automatism, transmitted across the generations.

<sup>445</sup> The word 'Ungeziefer' is an unmistakable intertext with Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* where Gregor Samsa awakens to find himself transformed into an 'ungeheuer[e] Ungeziefer', an indistinct creature blurring the

resulting in tower ready to be called to attention: ‘Der Turm stand Wache, wie ihm befohlen war’ (225: ‘proud masterpiece’; ‘malleable clay’; ‘the tower stood to attention as was commanded of it’). Vera’s self-portrayal as a tower made of clay (‘Lehm’) created by the mother’s divinely sanctioned power (‘es war göttliche Wille, es war ihr Wille’, 97: It was divine will, it was her will) provides a fruitful intertext with the medieval Jewish legend of the Golem (Hebrew for ‘formless mass’): a created ‘creature’ sculpted from clay at a time of persecution who, according to historian Cathy S. Gelbin, ‘frequently resembles human form so closely that his artificiality is indistinguishable to human form.’<sup>446</sup> In the legend, the Golem is brought to life to aid its master until it begins to gain in strength and become frightening to its creator, who destroys his creation. Vera as the ‘gut dressiert’ lump of clay (9, ‘well-trained’) mobilises this narrative tradition of the Golem creature, which troublingly collapses Vera’s victim narrative into one of Jewish resistance and survival, which is especially interesting in view of Mitgutsch’s preoccupation with Jewish themes in her later work *Zwei Leben und ein Tag*. Plus, Vera, Marie’s ‘Golem’, survives and speaks through her torment, offering the possibility of resistance and emancipation from the tyranny of the creator.

Furthermore, Vera’s desperation to be read as a victim strains the reader’s credulity when she claims that the mother is right to inflict these punishments on her (‘hätte sie volle Gerechtigkeit walten lassen, hätte sie mich erschlagen müssen,’ 96: ‘if she had wanted to serve complete justice, she would have had to kill me’), emphasising her powerlessness before the tyrannical will of the mother. The disbelief of the reader in this strained narrative debunks the validity of the victim reading. By bending to her punishments, Vera merely prolongs the legacy of violence begun with Marie, despite intuiting that the circle of victimhood and perpetratorhood is inherently unproductive (‘Sie tat alles für das Kind [Vera] ... es tat [Marie] weh, ihre Aufopferung so wenig belohnt zu sehen’, 89: ‘She did everything for the child ... it hurt her to see her self-sacrifice so little rewarded’): With her pessimistic conclusion, ‘es ist mir nicht gelungen die Kette zu unterbrechen. Ich bin auch hier die Tochter meiner Mutter geblieben’ (156: ‘I did not manage to break the chain. Here too I have stayed my mother’s daughter’), the narrator seems to be undermining any notion of individual agency within repetitive and constraining mechanics of creation and generation. This dedifferentiated trauma caused by exposure to violence of any kind is what Fassin and Rechtman warn against when

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boundaries of the monster, the insect, the creature and the ogre. Franz Kafka, ‘Die Verwandlung’ in *Sämtliche Erzählungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1993), pp.56-99, p.56.

<sup>446</sup> Cathy S. Gelbin, *The Golem Returns. From German Romantic Literature to Global Jewish Culture, 1808-2008* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011), p.6.



they highlight that ‘the understandable pathos attached to the violent events that cause trauma lead us to ignore the fact that social agents are not passive recipients of the label traumatised.’<sup>447</sup> Kosta concludes that Mitgutsch’s novel is about ‘das Gefühl der Machtlosigkeit’ which would coincide with Vera’s own admission of her and her mother’s inability to resist their physical and psychological conditioning by their pasts.<sup>448</sup> However, Kosta’s interpretation leaves no room for the text’s achievement in its negotiation of mobile subject positions, and does not leave open the possibility for recovering agency, which I argue the text enables, as I will explore in the next section.

### **Orality and the boundaries of the self**

By emphasising the physical transmission of violent historical legacies, Mitgutsch reveals how the body is a primary site of historical experience acting as a cipher for the modes of its historical conditioning; in *Die Züchtigung* food and an interest in the mouth as a locus of feeding and communication crystallise the way in which the unstable subjectivities and toxic historical reverberations within the novel are embodied. In a 2002, interview she has stated that the most important narrative component of a novel is the ‘plasticity’ of the characters:

für mich ist die Plastizität das wichtigste Kriterium eines Romans, auch aus meiner Sicht als Leserin. Die Sprache muss das Mittel sein zu diesem Sichtbarwerden, sie darf die Personen nicht verstellen, es geht mir um mehrdimensionale Ansichten der Figuren, und nicht um eine Tapiserie.<sup>449</sup>

Plasticity in *Die Züchtigung* is evoked by the embeddedness of Vera and Marie within each other via the oral transmission of language and food, which plays a major role in the text. Marie’s experience of starvation during the war in which she admits to eating rotten pig’s food to stay alive (70) leads her to compensate by overfeeding her child. Following Marie’s death, Vera develops severe bulimic symptoms, filling the lack of emotional nutrition provided by her mother: ‘Meine Mutter kam in mein Leben zurück als Nahrung’ (7: ‘My mother came back into my life as nourishment’). According to German psychoanalyst Alice Miller, anorexia and bulimia are symptoms of cruel parenting: ‘if their behaviour and helplessness trigger strong emotions in the adults’ dealing with them, the children need not feel guilty about it, even if

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<sup>447</sup> Fassin and Rechtmann, p. xi.

<sup>448</sup> Kosta, p.248.

<sup>449</sup> Günter A. Höfler, “‘Ideologie interessiert mich nicht’: Aus einem Gespräch mit Anna Mitgutsch’ in *Anna Mitgutsch* (Linz: Die Rampe, 2004), p.91: ‘For me the plasticity is the most important characteristic of the novel, from my point of view as a reader. Language must be the means to this processing of becoming visible, language must not displace people, I like to have dimensional characters rather than a tapestry.’

those adults attempt to blame it on them.’<sup>450</sup> She diagnoses the circularity in the disorder by pinpointing the fact that the blame is often shifted onto the sufferer for the afflictions she causes others to feel. For example, ‘how can you do this to us?’ or ‘you are so ungrateful for refusing to eat what I have prepared for you?’<sup>451</sup> In *Die Züchtigung* where the narrator compulsively repeats that her mother’s fits of rage are due to her failing to match up to the ideal image of a daughter that the mother has tirelessly self-sacrificed herself in order to create. Chernin makes the link between motherhood, orality and food clear: ‘from the deepest layers of meaning, the mother is always conjured up and made present by the presence of food.’<sup>452</sup> Freud defines the oral impulse as governing the barrier between inside and outside, according to the old adage ‘you are what you eat’: ‘Expressed in the language of the oldest, that is, oral impulses, the alternative runs thus: “I should like to eat that” or “I should like to spit it out”; and, put more generally: “It shall be inside me” or “it shall be outside me”’<sup>453</sup>

In *Die Züchtigung* the compulsive absorption or refusal of food alternately convey the desire to convey the oral symbiosis with the mother as a source of nourishment and generation, as well as the reflection of the mother’s withdrawal of emotional nourishment which is meant to accompany the oral phase of a child’s development. In Alice Miller’s view, ‘bulimics, like anorexics, do not know what they need so they can never eat their fill.’<sup>454</sup> Fischer notes ‘our three basic needs, for food, security and love are so mixed and mingled and entwined that we cannot straightly think of one without the others.’<sup>455</sup> The legacy of recent history percolates through the narrator’s physicality and is enforced by the mother’s ‘Nahrungsterror’ which represents an overwhelming obstacle for the daughter’s sense of identity and emancipation: ‘Immer wieder habe ich mich ausgelöscht, und Befehle an mir vollgestreckt, ich bin ein gehorsames Opfer, verschwinde in den Rollen... je nach bedarf’ (179: ‘I always extinguished myself and completed orders as fully as I could; I am an obedient victim, I full identify with my role, as I am commanded to’). This boundary between the mother and child is policed by orality, according to Skubal: ‘The separate space of our humanness between birth and death is

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<sup>450</sup> Alice Miller, *The Body Never Lies: The Lingering Effects of Cruel Parenting*, tr. Andrew Jenkins (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), p. 174-5.

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>452</sup> Cited by Susanne Skubal, *Word of Mouth: Food and Fiction After Freud* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.7.

<sup>453</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘On Negation’ [1925] in *SE 19*, p.237.

<sup>454</sup> Miller, *The Body Never Lies*, p.182.

<sup>455</sup> M.F.K. Fisher, *The Gastronomical Me* [1976]. Cited by Skubal, p.4.

made possible by the maternally urged and inflected oral.<sup>456</sup> In the same way an identification with the mother's experiences reveals the porosity of the barrier between mother and daughter.

Attitudes to food and eating mark Vera's disavowed but embodied resistance to her 'creation' by other mother, and the creaturely manifestations of this refusal to be moulded clash with her demand to be apprehended as a victim. They also symbolise a difficulty-metabolised socio-cultural context that irradiates the bodies of its inhabitants, as suffering relating to the scarcity of food is deeply anchored in Marie's experience following the war, rooted in the period of occupation, economic deprivation and national humiliation: the root of Austria's 'Lebenslüge.' For instance, Marie's food mania is a revival of the conditions of wartime for Vera: 'der Tisch wird zum täglichen Kriegsschauplatz' (95: 'the table was a daily war arena') and the bodily after-effects of this era resonate for decades ('[Marie] musste noch immer ihren unersättlichen Nachkriegshunger stillen und wurde dick dabei', 93).<sup>457</sup> Her obsession with food is explicitly linked to Marie's and Austria's identity crisis and political failure. She eats 'um die gesellschaftliche Niederlage wettzumachen' (117: 'to compensate for this defeat of society'). In his *Frankfurter Vorlesungen*, Heinrich Böll laments the lack of communality and 'Seßhaftigkeit' marked by a lack of eating ('Es wird so wenig gegessen in der deutschen Literatur wie wenig darin gewohnt wird'; 'In German literature, people eat as little as they live') in post-war German literature as a sign for the fact that 'das Humane scheint suspekt zu sein (the human seems suspect).'<sup>458</sup> The mother's orality as a means of transmitting victimhood through generations national identity has become a bitter taste in the mouth, a source of visceral displeasure, or, in Handke's oft-quoted phrase: 'Das Fette an dem ich würgen: Österreich.'<sup>459</sup>

Only after Marie's death does Vera develop her dangerous bulimic symptoms which surface as unbearable affective intensities with animalistic undertones ('ich biß vor Einsamkeit schreiend in die Polster', 241: 'I bit into the pillows screaming with loneliness'). As Skubal notes

Anorexia offers a phantasy of omnipotence at this primary, oral site. The anorexic reclaims control. She not only asserts control over her weight, her body (shape), her (a)sexuality, her excretory function, her menstrual, ovulation and reproductive system, and in sum, her very identity, but she exerts tremendous

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<sup>456</sup> Skubal, p.40.

<sup>457</sup> 'Marie had to feed her insatiable post-war hunger and became fat in the process.'

<sup>458</sup> Böll, p.78,56.

<sup>459</sup> Peter Handke, *Das Gewicht der Welt* (Salzburg: Residenz, 1977), p.21: 'The fat on which I choke: Austria.'

control over her family and loved ones and against a culture that demands a level of order and conformity.<sup>460</sup>

Vera's control over her food habits is a mode of self-control in a universe where she feels she has been helplessly created and inscribed by the toxic historical legacies working through the mother's pedagogy. Citing a patient suffering from anorexia, Bordo notes how the experience of control of one's own mode and means of nourishment is experienced as an exhilarating proof of control over one's body: 'you make of your own body your very own kingdom where you are the tyrant, the absolute dictator.'<sup>461</sup> Another patient notes the link between anorexia and the unfulfilled hopes of pushy parenting, of which the 'I' in Mitgutsch's text is a victim of herself: 'I am full of my mother... she is in me even if she isn't there.'<sup>462</sup> Anorexia, which Skubal claims to have risen since the 1960s in conjunction with the ready availability of the contraceptive pill, is an act of defiance against motherhood: 'for the anorexic, the erasing of the female body, the signature amenorrhea, and the impossibility of motherhood – all accomplished and signified by refusal at the primary oral site – points to an untoned, unrecovered and irrepressible unconscious "no."'<sup>463</sup>

Eating is thus a mode of oral recognition and absorption of the mother in the name of a love that the protagonist and narrator hopes will replace the destructive control the absent mother exerts: 'Ich aß, bis mir schlecht war, um noch mehr gefallen zu erwecken, liebesheischend stopfte ich das Essen in mich hinein. Ihre Mühe, ihre Aufopferung, ihre Liebe, die meinen Körper in einen Fettkloß verwandelten.' (172: 'I ate until I felt sick to please her even more, seeking love I stuffed the food into me. Her effort, her self-sacrifice, her love, that turned my body into a lump of fat.') The affective crescendo the death of the mother provokes which sparks an uncanny chain of bodily and emotional reactions enables resistance to the dominance of the mother, despite the narrator's sense of powerlessness to Marie's influence. Vermeulen notes that affect is 'pre-subjective' and can accompany new subject formations: 'affects emerge as potentialities that communicate both a sense of powerlessness and an opportunity for novel combinations, connections and assemblages to emerge.'<sup>464</sup> The troubled

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<sup>460</sup> Skubal, p.72.

<sup>461</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p.150.

<sup>462</sup> Bordo, p.156.

<sup>463</sup> Skubal, p.76.

<sup>464</sup> Pieter Vermeulen, *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel: Creature, Affect, Form* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p.8, 11.

relationship with food, a symbol of power, and of the boundary of the mother and the subject leads to the troubling of Vera's identity.

Following her self-starvation, Vera begins to grow a beard. This 'widernatürlicher Haarwuchs' (226: 'hair growth contrary to nature') troubles Marie's creation of the nourished child who also begins to blur gender boundaries. Evading the legibility of her mother, Vera slips between 'Frau oder Halbfrau oder Nichtfrau' (224: 'woman or half woman or not woman') troubling the feminine cast that her mother has prepared for her. The description of her new physique as 'rassig' enables this involuntary but autonomous physical reaction to leave the possibility for resistance against the mother open: 'rassig hatte es früher geheißen, aber diese Haare im Gesicht waren nicht mehr rassig, die waren nur mehr unheimlich' (222: 'it would previously have been called fiery, but these facial hairs were no longer fiery but simply uncanny'). The term 'rassig' denotes fieriness in a woman, and wildness in an animal (the Duden gives examples of 'eine rassige Südländerin' and 'ein rassiger Pferd', 'ungezügelt' as a synonym). Yet, the destabilising potential of her 'fiery', unbridled appearance as a result of her eating disorder introduces the disruptive potential for violence to touch upon non-regulated aspects of feminine sensuality, an uncanny, creaturely by-product of the experience of coercion. Although the final sentence of the text reads: 'sie herrscht und ich diene [...] sie gewinnt immer im Namen des Gehorsams, der Vernunft und der Angst' (246: she rules and I serve, she always wins in the name of obedience of reason and of fear'), Vera tries to maintain narrative authority over her victimhood, yet disavows this subordination through the creative creaturely bodily figurations which allow her to inhabit alternative subject positions escaping the mother's generative transmission of power.

*Die Züchtigung's* destabilising configuration of generation, maternity, the porosity of self and other relies on orality as a means of transmission, infection and feeding whereby the self is constantly exposed to the social and political by the vector of the mother. In Kristeva's view, 'the biological fate that causes [women] to be the site of the species chains us to space: home native soil, motherland (*matrie*).'<sup>465</sup> Mitgutsch's dramatization of roles of 'surfaces of contact' (*Reibungsfläche*) in the formation of the subject's identity and narrative as a negotiation of the victimhood myth is how *Die Züchtigung* induces such a productive discussion of how the private and the political, the bodily and the social mutually contaminate

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<sup>465</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'What of Tomorrow's Nation?' in *Nations without Nationalism*, tr. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia, 1993), pp.1-47, p.33-34.

each other. As Teuchtmann illuminatingly argues, in Mitgutsch's 'individualistische Protagonisten wird das politische Umfeld sichtbar, das sich im alltäglichen Privatleben widerspiegelt.'<sup>466</sup> Vera's creaturely drama is played out within a generational conflict that stages the tensions of a national and personal identity built on victimhood. Thus, I fundamentally disagree with Hanlin's diagnosis of *Die Züchtigung* as an 'elegant allegory of Austria as a beaten child.'<sup>467</sup> The quotation reveals the narrator's bias toward this interpretation of history, but this does not make the novel itself an allegory of Austria's ineluctable victimhood and perpetratorhood. Vera's inability to shake off her mother's alignment with a legacy of totalitarian oppression contrasts with her insistence on victimhood, revealing this narrative to be untenable. Mitgutsch has highlighted how women could be perceived as the 'Anführungsorgan der faschistoiden patriarkalischen Strukturen', and Vera's identification of her mother with the apocryphal tormentors of the recent past reveals how persistent anxieties regarding continuing legacies of historical violence are and the real suffering any contact with these entails at the affective level.<sup>468</sup> The dynamic disavowals and appeals for redemptive victimhood in the novel evince Mitgutsch's self-conscious attempt to excavate the recent past as she reveals:

Fast alle meine Bücher sind eine Abrechnung mit der österreichischen Gesellschaft. Jedes Buch ist eine Auseinandersetzung mit einer anderen Facette desselben Problems: des unehelichen Umgangs mit der NS-Vergangenheit.<sup>469</sup>

Thus, *Die Züchtigung* dramatizes what Sebald calls the 'spectral materialism' of the victimhood myth and the anxieties crystallised around participation in and transmission of violent historical legacies. Defined as 'the persistence of past suffering that has [...] been absorbed into the substance of lived space, into the "setting" of human history,' Santner's spectral materialism inflects the traumatic process of engaging with the mother, as a myth of origin and as a repository of meaning.<sup>470</sup> Yet, in its narrative inconsistencies and tensions crystallised around the porous body, *Die Züchtigung* enables an insight into the way the body

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<sup>466</sup> Kristin Teuchtmann, *Über die Faszination des Unsagbaren* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003), p.33: 'in [her] individualistic protagonists the political context is visible, which mirrors itself in daily, private existence.'

<sup>467</sup> Hanlin, p.103.

<sup>468</sup> Vera defines her mother as one of those people 'die, die Gänsehaut über den Rücken jagen und die Vorstellungskraft stocken lassen, wenn wir von ihnen in den Geschichtsbüchern lesen' (135: 'who give you goosebumps and choke your imagination when you read about them in the history books.')

<sup>469</sup> Anna Waltraud Mitgutsch, cited by Sidney Rosenfeld 'Anna Migutsch. Schreiben als Protest und Affirmation' in *Die Rampe: Hefte für Literatur* (2:2007), pp.33-38, p.35: 'Almost all of my books audit Austrian society. Every book engages with another aspect of the same problem: the dishonest engagement with the history of the National Socialist past.'

<sup>470</sup> Santner, p.85.

is constructed in light of history but the narrator's assumption of narrative agency in the recognition and disavowal of these embodied traces of the past ('diese Worten mit giftigen Widerhaken', 211) gives the reader a glimpse of how traumatic legacies may be overcome: 'ich lache weil ich die Macht habe, die Kette zu unterbrechen und alles ungültig zu machen, das Abendgebet und der Gehorsam, die Angst und vielleicht sogar den Haß.'<sup>471</sup> It is the potential of an ethics of narrative attention to the creaturely that can accommodate competing identities forged in the recent past that I will explore in the next section.

### ***Februarschatten*: The ethics of creaturely attention**

In *Februarschatten* (1984), Elisabeth Reichart examines the interplay of violence and agency by undermining the feasibility of maintaining an unequivocal narrative of victimhood. The historical event that underpins *Februarschatten*, the so-called 'Mühlviertler Hasenjagd' (Mill District Rabbit Hunt) took place on February 2, 1945; local citizens in a village near Mauthausen concentration camp ganged together to hunt down and murder almost 500 Soviet escapees from the nearby camp. Though the novella builds up to the shattering revelation of Hilde's complicity in her brother's murder as a result of his harbouring an escapee from the Mauthausen concentration camp, *Februarschatten's* highly complex narrative focalisation traces how historical consciousness and individual experiences accommodate complex figurations of agency and disavowal rather than framing them according to monolithic historical categories such as victim/perpetrator. The novella, structured as an exchange between a daughter, seeking to mine the truth about her mother's wartime experience, and a mother with a terrible secret, examines the tenacity with which the mother invests in her own victimhood and creaturely passivity through cross-generational communication: 'Durch kaum ein anderes Werk der österreichischen Gegenwartsliteratur wird deutlicher, dass die Darstellung von Familie als Ort der Erfahrung von Vergangenheit nur dann existenzielle Glaubwürdigkeit erhält, wenn sie in einem intergenerationellen Dialog erfolgt.'<sup>472</sup> As I will show, *Februarschatten* explores memory as a dynamic process based on creaturely responses

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<sup>471</sup> 104: 'I laugh because I have the power to break the chain and make everything invalid, evening prayer and obedience, fear and maybe even hatred.'

<sup>472</sup> Ernst Seibert, "'Sprachliche Narben'" von Käthe Recheis zu Elisabeth Reichart.' in *Geschichte und Geschichten: Die Kinder- und Jugendliteratur und das kulturelle und politische Gedächtnis*, ed. by Gabriele von Glasenapp and Gisela Wilkending (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2005), pp.199-210, p.207: 'No other work of contemporary Austrian literature makes it clearer that the representation of family is a site of experiencing the past and can only achieve credibility as such if it takes place across a generation dialogue.'

necessitating an ethics of care and attention, that move beyond the binary of victim/perpetrator, but rather recognise the atomisation of the post-war subject.

Reichart's text undertakes a similar engagement with orality as both generative and regressive, speech can be both destructive and creative here, and refusals to speak often result in the expulsion of other parts of the body, revealing the deeply troubling embodied legacy of the toxic past. Hilde's betrayal of her own brother in the name of an ideal of Nazi Germany focalises Hilde's use of her own agency on the side of the perpetrators, an agency which is constantly disavowed and concealed. In light of Reichart's novel it is no longer possible to ascribe women's participation in Nazi totalitarianism and genocide as a coercive enforcement of the male status quo, as Karin Windaus-Wender affirms 'Wenn Frauen die antisemitische, rassistische Nazi-Ideologie teilten, dann nicht aus eigenen Motiven heraus, sondern weil sie sich dem männlichen Rassismus und Antisemitismus anpassten,' but rather women's agency is the unsettling and disavowed legacy of totalitarianism in *Februarschatten*.<sup>473</sup> Schreckenberger discusses Reichart's work from the perspective of 'pathological amnesia' and signals that the main theme of 'suppressing private and collective memory.'<sup>474</sup> Reichart's *Februarschatten* is actually not about amnesia but the corrosive effect of unexpressed memories, different and intersecting narratives that reveal a broad moral spectrum of action and impotence. The mother-protagonist reiterates the imperatives that condition not only the discursive circumstances of her upbringing but the normative structures that generate her as a post-war subject: 'Zuerst durch die Botschaft der Erwachsenen. Vergiß was du gehört hast. Was du gesehen hast. Vergiß! Aber bald war es nicht mehr nötig, dieses Wort in sie hineinzuschreiben. Bald war aller Wort ihr Wort. Bald würde sie selbst das Wort weitergeben wollen.' (31: 'first the message of the adults, forget, what you have heard forget! What you have seen. Forget! but soon it will not be necessary to scream this word into her. Soon all words will be her words. Soon she will want to pass on the word for herself.') Forgetting is demanded in the name of the consensus and harmonious continuity of the village community, just as now Hilde is exhorted to remember by her daughter whose text attempts to offer some expiation of

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<sup>473</sup> Karin Windaus-Walser, 'Gnade der weiblichen Geburt?', *Feministische Studien* (1988), pp.102-115, p.102. Cited by Juliet Wigmore, *Das Erbe des Verrates: die Opferrolle bei Elisabeth Reichart* (Salford: Working Papers in Literary and Cultural Studies, 1994), p.3. 'If women shared the antisemitic, racist Nazi ideology then it was not because of their own motives, but rather because they wanted to conform to masculine racism and antisemitism'

<sup>474</sup> Helga Schreckenberger, 'Suffering from Austria: Social Criticism in Prose Fiction from the Seventies and Eighties' in *Shadows of the Past: Austrian Literature of the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Schulte and Chapple (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009), pp.107-124, p.116,117.



Hilde's unspoken guilt. Yet as this example shows, Hilde is both created as a post-war subject by the 'Botschaft' (message) of her social environment, in the sense that the 'word' is the original mode of subject creation (*Am Anfang war das Wort*), and she takes this environment-creating force upon herself by wanting to transmit it. *Februarschatten* is in this sense a duplicitous narrative: it is both a confession of guilt on behalf of the mother, and a testimony of attitudes to a real past written by an attentive narrator.

Hilde's entire narrative is initially marked by a desire to inhabit the position of the victim regarding the events of the war and the authoritarian brutal social circumstances in which she grew up. For instance, her narrative focuses on the foreign occupiers, which also reveals a slippage with the Soviet prisoners who escape the camp and are murdered by the villagers, demonstrating the unreliability of Hilde's narrative position and the inadequacy of linguistic categories to convey a multivalent historical legacy: 'Hier in dem Dorf sind auch Kommunisten gewesen. / Viele. / Russen' (61: 'Here in the village there were also communists. Many. Russians.')

This slippage not only indicates the tenacity of Nazi propaganda against the Russians, but also plugs into a wider cultural anxiety about the vulnerability of women to foreign occupiers and invaders.<sup>475</sup> In addition, the daughter is aligned with these aggressive figures, displaying Hilde's feelings of persecution by the daughter's questions and righteousness: 'Ausgerechnet Kommunistin. / Wenn Hilde daran dachte, haßte sie die Tochter' (61: 'A communist, of all things. When Hilde thought about that, she hated the daughter.')

Furthermore, Hilde refers to a spurious sense of shame at having grown up in an environment of ambient violence and hatred evoked by embodied cringes (a further example of Santner's 'signifying stresses') at crucial moments of recollection: 'ihre Hände krallten sich ineinander' (19: 'her hands clawed at each other.')

In the following passage, the prevalence of the preposition *auf* proposes the body as a surface exposed to violence from previous generations, mothers in league with fathers who transmit and enforce a violent historical legacy: 'Noch immer die Schläge ihres Vaters. Auf den Körper der Mutter. Auf ihren Körper. Noch immer die gleichen schlagenden Hände. Vaterhände. Mutterhände. Männerhände. – Die vor allem' (46: 'always the beating from her father. On the body of the mother. On her body. Always the same beating hands. Fatherhands. Motherhands. Menshands. – Those above all.')

While Hilde's father is represented as a drunken brute ('Wartete vor der Haustür auf sie. Mit der

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<sup>475</sup> Many women were raped by invading soldiers (up to 70,000 reported cases in between April and June 1945), and subsequently 'rapes by Russian soldiers have become deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of the Austrian people.' Ingrid Fraberger, Dieter Stiefl, "'Enemy Images'" in Bischoff, Pelinka, Stiefl, pp.56-97, p.68.

Fliegenpeitsche in der Hand. [...] Hört nur die versoffene Stimme des Vaters', 16), she repeatedly speaks of her brother's and husband's kindness, so by using the compound 'Männerhände' to evoke her brutalisation at the hands of others, she is using her femininity as a position of victimhood by default.<sup>476</sup> By deferring agency regarding the past to the physical violence of others, Hilde constantly seeks to defer the guilt that the novella tensely works up to.

The words of the father are just as disintegrating as actual physical gestures: 'Der Vater hatte sie auseinandergebrüllt. Hatte sie auseinandergeschlagen. Hatte ihnen Worte zugerufen, die Hilde vergessen hatte. Die weiterschmerzten. Als wäre der Ton in den Körper gedrungen.' (29: 'The father has shouted her to pieces. Had beaten her to pieces. Had shouted words at her, that Hilde had forgotten. That continued to hurt. As though the noise had penetrated her body.') Hilde's father stands for the patriarchal policing of femininity and family, and leaves traces of the past not at a cognitive level but at the symptomatic level of the creaturely, where the body is cringed according to the salience of the toxic past. Again, the body retains the memory of violence as a profound laceration of a person's agency and personal integrity, leaving behind an impression of impotence and vulnerability ('jene Hilflosigkeit. Die mit den Schlägen verbunden blieb,' 33: 'that helplessness. That remained tied to the blows.'). Past suffering is disabling and recurring: this is how it is stored in the body and in Hilde's narrative.

The novel is almost wholly written from Hilde's perspective with both third and first person narrative focalisers providing different angles on her experience, but *Februarschatten* continues to be articulated through her lens. The narrative complexity stems between the fissure between focaliser and narrator, as the text stems from the daughter's historical project about her parents' experiences (we know that she is 'eine Schriftstellerin', who is asking many historical questions 'Dann wird sie Frage stellen. Sie kann nie einfach zuhören' (47)).<sup>477</sup> Nevertheless, the privileging of the mother's lens in addition to the narrative ambiguity regarding the control of the daughter underline the prioritisation of the older generation's working out of guilt and complicity so that a perspective on the past may be developed. The more Hilde claims her invisibility and silence, the more her words appear on the page, as she competes for visibility in an empowering attempt to reveal her criminal part in the story that

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<sup>476</sup> 'He waited by the front door for her. With the fly swatter in his hand. She only heard the drunken voice of the father.'; Of Anton, Hilde's husband and Erika's father: 'Das erste, das Hilde an Anton aufgefallen war, war seine Stimme, seine leise Stimme. Unter all den Siegerstimmen' (13: 'The first thing that Hilde noticed about Anton was his voice, his quiet voice. Among all those victors' voices.')

<sup>477</sup> 'Then she will ask questions. She can never just listen.'

forms the background to *Februarschatten*: ‘Es gibt keinen Platz für mich. Jeder Platz ist von deinen Worten besetzt. Ich werde sie hinabspülen. Ganz tief. Damit sie mich nicht mehr quälen können’ (15: ‘There is no space for me. Every space is taken up with your words. I am going to wash them down. very thoroughly. That way they cannot disturb you any more.’) The slippery narrative focalisation allows for an organic, and multi-faceted view of the ‘Hasenjagd’ events, where competing narratives vie for visibility, keeping many more interpretive avenues open to the reader whose view of historical events is nuanced, rather than fixed.

Thus, I attempt to counter Höller’s interpretation of *Februarschatten* as an image of the trauma of genocide, but rather as an affirmation of agency and action in response to passivity and reactive traumatisation: “Februarschatten” ist das einprägsame Sprachbild für die körperlich-atmosphärische Dimension des geschichtlichen Traumas der NS-Vernichtung im Umkreis des KZ Mauthausen.<sup>478</sup> In the following sections, I demonstrate how Hilde indulges in a victim-position in which she emphasises her lack of agency over her existence, a subject position which is shown to be untenable through an unexplored leitmotiv in the novella, that of a cat who crystallises Hilde’s desire for victimhood but also undermines her passivity in the radical contrast to the contact with the cat establishes with the dehumanised and reified figure of the concentration camp prisoner.

The leitmotiv of the cat embodies these narrative inconsistencies that enable a more complex understanding of Austrians’ relationship with their past. The figure both enables Hilde’s self-identification as a victim, but also unmasks her unconscious slippages revealing her alignment with the Nazi perpetrators. The hitherto uncommented presence accompanies the soliloquies of the tormented mother of *Februarschatten* in several guises. There is the black cat of Hilde’s childhood, a stray that Hilde took in as a girl and fed before her father discovered her secret pet and viciously killed it in a drunken frenzy, confirming Scholtmeijer’s view that ‘the animal victim discloses to culture the debilities it does not want to confront,’ namely the inherent brutality of Austrian patriarchal rural society.<sup>479</sup> The black cat reappears in Erika’s girlhood, and the mother kills the cat in order to appease the neighbours who dislike its constant mewling and disruption to their gardens. The third black cat accompanies Hilde in her

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<sup>478</sup> Hans Höller, ‘*Februarschatten*: Wunden, die das Ich schleifen’, <http://derstandard.at/1389858133703/Februarschatten-Wunden-die-das-Ich-schleifen> [Accessed: 5 April 2014]: ‘*Februarschatten* is the most affecting literary representation for the bodily and atmospherical dimension of the historical trauma of national socialist genocide in the area of the Mauthausen concentration camp’

<sup>479</sup> Marian Scholtmeijer, *Animal Victims in Modern Fiction: From Sanctity to Sacrifice* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1993), p.291.

widowhood appearing at salient moments of suffering: ‘Die Katze kam. Roch an dem Blut. Hilde stieß sie weg’ (11: ‘The cat came, smelt the blood, Hilde kicked it away.’) The cat accompanies times of physical weakness and vulnerability which emphasises the association of weakness and suffering with animals, making them a powerful trope of victimhood and powerlessness. After going to the pensioners’ ball, Hilde is overwhelmed by memories of physical violence endured by her father. She returns home delirious, and the cat is there to greet her: ‘die Katze schlich um ihre Füße. Ließ Hilde nicht aus den Augen. Es war gut, daß etwas da war. Das sie trösten konnte’ (68: ‘the cat twisted itself around her feet. Did not let Hilde out of its sight. It was good that there was something there. That could console her’). When Erika visits and wishes to go out in the village, Hilde does not want to go with her, for fear of the revelations that will inevitably come out of this confrontation of the space of crime. Here again, the cat accompanies these pressure points where the narrative focus crystallises the desire to adhere to a narrative of suffering and vulnerability: ‘Außerdem will ich die Katze nicht so lange allein lassen. Diese Katze.’ (19: ‘anyway I don’t want to leave the cat alone for too long. This cat.’). The cat appears as a totem of her suffering, and is a welcome presence that enforces her feelings of victimhood and physical suffering. After a beating from her father, Hilde depicts how she crawled to evoke her brokenness following tyrannical abuse, representing ‘wie sie zur Mutter in das Bett kroch, ja kroch’ (45: ‘how she crawled, yes, crawled, to her mother in the bed’). The shock at the sufferer’s dehumanisation emphasises Scholtmeijer’s view that animals are ‘argument against our own aggression’: Hilde’s creaturely embodiment of her experience of violence is profoundly shattering and victimising to which she alerts the reader with the emphasis on ‘kroch’.<sup>480</sup> Hilde’s attachment to the cat does not assume her positive identification or compassion for the tortured prisoners revealing complex webs of investments in victimhood and disavowals of agency in the context of the torture of a dehumanised and alien subject. Therefore, we cannot assume unproblematically with Simone Weil and Anat Pick that all suffering will evoke compassion on the basis of shared creaturely vulnerability, which Hilde had previously requested from the reader in her rapport with the cat: Weil claims ‘compassion with every creature because it is far from good. Infinitely far. Abandoned. God abandons our whole entire being – flesh, blood, sensibility, intelligence, love – to the pitiless necessity of matter.’<sup>481</sup> Hilde seems to be aware of the unviability of this narrative accessory which disengages her own personal agency from the moment of violence she is building up to

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<sup>480</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 292.

<sup>481</sup> Simone Weil, cited by Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.4.

confess to: ‘Vielleicht wenn ich mich an die Katze schmiege, werden die Schatten keinen Platz haben. Doch die Schatten schlugen auf sie ein. Schlugen sie fort von der Katze. Schlugen sie wie jede Nacht dort hin. Auf die Seite der Schuldigen’ (12: ‘Maybe if I cuddle up to the cat, the shadows will not get in. But the shadows beat in on her. Whisked her away from the cat. Threw themselves on her as they did every night. Onto the side of the guilty people.’) To face her shadows, she must dispense of these narrative safety blankets.

Hilde’s creaturely attachment to the cat as a totem of victimhood and helplessness is radically undermined by her confession about her part in the so-called ‘Hasenjagd’ massacre of February 1945. Whereas the cat enables Hilde to provide an exculpating creaturely narrative by identifying with an animal in times of helplessness or embarrassment, the language she attaches to the escapee whom her brother reveals her co-option into the rhetoric of Nazi persecution at the time of her crime. In her first encounter with the escaped prisoner, she atomises and dehumanises the man’s body, referred to only as ‘ein Bündel’: ‘Jetzt plumpste etwas aus dem Kasten heraus. ... Hilde sah das geschleifte Bündel. Sah sie in das blutverschmierte knochige Geischt des Bündels’ (109: ‘Suddenly something dropped out of the cupboard. Hilde saw the bandaged bundle. She looked into the bloodied, bony face of the bundle’). The bundle’s uncanny physicality is frightening and alienating, evoking no sympathy, even when it is being brutally attacked by the local schoolteacher Frau Emmerich: ‘[die] gegen die auf dem Boden liegende Gestalt schlug. Gegen eine Gestalt, wie Hilde sie noch nie gesehen hatte. Gegen dieses knochige Gesicht. In dem die Haut spannte’ (102: ‘She hit a figure lying on the floor. She hit a figure; the type of figure she had never seen before. Against this bony face. On which the skin was stretched.’) The closest Hilde comes to identifying it as human is to call the man ‘der Flüchtling’, which complies with National Socialist rhetoric, replicated here.

However, when the passage is revisited under Erika’s guidance the Russian prisoners’ humanity is reconstituted. Hilde initially only calls the villagers humans (‘Von dem Dorf kamen Menschen herauf. Bewaffnet mit Dreschflegeln,’ 98: ‘People came from the village, armed with flails’), representing the racial and national community of the Third Reich (‘Deutschland, das waren sie alle. Deutschland, das machte sie groß und stark,’ 89: ‘Germany, that is what they all were. Germany, that made them big and strong’). Hilde’s narrative disavowals show the daughter’s encouragement to her mother to narrate the episode of the ‘Menschenjagd’ that had been buried in her conscience, and resistance to the coming confession: ‘Dann sah sie weg [...]

Sah weg [...] Sah weg [...] Verbotene Gedanken' (102: 'Then she looked away ... looked away ... looked away ... forbidden thoughts'). The tone then quickly shifts to one of empathy: 'Im Schnee fanden sie Halbtote. Überall fanden Menschen Menschen.'<sup>482</sup> The sentence may also be an editorial licence by Erika, who is rewriting her mother's story, and attempting to resolve her mother's vacillation with a redemptive belief in the reconciliatory power of the idea of humanity as a guarantor against violence and a seal of empathy. Here the strains enacted by the narrator evolve into a recognition of the prisoners as human, and therefore vulnerable and worthy of compassion. As Haslinger notes, writers have a crucial responsibility when it comes to accommodating society's excluded others, which is evident in the dynamic narration of *Februarschatten*: 'Ob Flüchtlinge in einer Gesellschaft als schutzbedürftige Menschen gelten oder als "Parasiten" und "Kriminelle" hat nämlich mehr mit der Tätigkeit von Schriftstellern zu tun, als es auf den ersten Blick scheinen mag.'<sup>483</sup> The text, rather than focusing on the disintegrating forms being attacked by the characters designated by their civic names (Frau Emmerich, Herr Pesendorfer), enters into an empathetic register focussing on vulnerability and compassion ('Diese Körper. Unbewaffnet. Hilflos. / Zerbrechlich', 90: 'these bodies. Unarmed. Helpless. Fragile') not apparent in Hilde's first recollection. The isolation of the word 'Zerbrechlich' adds a new philosophical invocation to recognise a common creatureliness.

While *Februarschatten* is mediated through the narrative voice of Hilde, it may be that Erika is imposing a framework on her mother which does not comply with the interpretation of this historical event on the side of the perpetrators that contemporary readers demand, namely that violence was experienced in as shattering a way by the inhabitants of the Mühlviertel as it was for the prisoners. These differing textual and historical perspectives are both accommodated within the text which conveys the multivalent readings of identity, suffering and agency:

Sich in den Worten der Tochter nicht finden konnte. So wenig, wie in der Tochter. Diese Frau, vor der in abgebrochenen Sätzen die Rede ist. Diese Frau bin ich nicht. Die ist ein Hirngespinnst der Tochter. Ich habe nie eine schwarze Katze gehabt. Auch sie hat nie eine schwarze Katze gehabt. es gibt sie nicht. Diese Katzen. Dieses Dorf. Diesen Vater.<sup>484</sup>

<sup>482</sup> 102: 'In the snow they found people half-dead. Everywhere humans found humans.'

<sup>483</sup> Josef Haslinger, 'Aux armes citoyens!' in Leitner, p.151: 'For refugees to be considered to be people deserving of protection, or criminals, or parasites, actually has more to do with the activities of writers than may first seem to be the case.'

<sup>484</sup> 74: 'Could not find herself in the words of the daughter. So little, just as she could not see herself in the daughter. This woman, who is talked about in broken off sentences. I am not this woman. She is a figure of the daughter's imagination. Ich have never had a black cat. And she has never had a black cat. There is no such thing. These cats. This village. This father.'

Thus, Hilde's narrative is profoundly fragmented in its textual slippages between a language of victimhood, of exclusionary perpetratorhood and of real suffering and resentment which combine to create a nuanced and complex tableau of the 'Menschenjagd' that occurred on 2 February 1945. Images of stains, holed clothing and bruises on skin symbolise disturbances and interruptions into Hilde's narrative of victimhood. Her dreams and flashbacks feature bruising ('als sie [Hilde und ihre Mutter] beide mit blauen Flecken bedeckt waren', 41) and torn fabrics ('Die Flecken aus ihrem Kleid [lösten] in Löcher auf', 46: 'the stains on her dress dissolved into holes') to signify a troubled surface, textural holes: inconsistencies that come about as a result of violence (the bruises) and the difficulty of dealing with (*bewältigen*) a complex and multivalent past. Hilde uses the metaphor of the bruise to present a narrative continuity between disturbing historical legacies and their inscription on the body: 'Auch jetzt schimmerten blaue Flecken durch die Kleider der tanzenden Frauen. Hörte Hilde zu Hause die Männer auf die Frauen einschreien. Hörte die Schläge auf ihre Körper niederprasseln. Auf ihre weiche Körper.'<sup>485</sup> Just as the skin of the narrator is disturbed by the violence to which she is exposed, and can no longer act as an integral container or boundary of a disavowed past, the mouth also signifies a history that cannot be contained.

*Februarschatten*, like *Die Züchtigung*, insists on the oral not only as an orifice, a vector of speech and therefore testimony, confession and telling, but also on the mouth as a boundary between inside and outside, silence and speech, self and other. Hilde's teacher, 'deren Mund und Hand die Kinder nur hart und kantig berührten' (30), uses her mouth as a means of transmitting violent ideologies just as her body physically intimidates the children. Hilde's shame at her violent father upon introducing her mild-mannered husband cringes her body and turns her mouth into a barrier to speech: 'Hatte gefühlt wie ihr Körper sich vor Scham zusammenzog. Die Worte den Mund verklebten' (38: 'felt how her body drew together from the shame. Words glued her mouth together'). Hilde's resistance to engaging with her daughter about her past also dramatises the mouth as a boundary: 'Hilde biß sich in die Unterlippe. Sah die Tochter nicht an' (42: 'Hilde bit her lower lip. Did not look at the daughter'). Her self-censorship is countered compulsively through her self-contamination; Hilde's alcoholism is an oral means of strengthening the barrier between her untold secrets and her daughter's desire to know and enforces her stigmatisation by the community ('Die rechten Händen griffen zu den Gläsern. Führten die Gläser zum Mund. [...] Alle Köpfe wendeten sich wieder von ihnen ab',

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<sup>485</sup> 46: 'Now too the blue stains gleamed through the clothes of the dancing women. Hilde heard the women being shouted into at home. Heard the beatings press down on their bodies. On their soft bodies.'

42: ‘The right hands reached for the glasses. Put the glasses to the mouth... All heads turned away from them’). On the other hand, alcohol allows Hilde to abdicate responsibility for her own speech, so that she can engage with her daughter’s questions (‘Du sollst mir Wein holen. Schnell. Sonst erzähle ich dir nichts,’ 41: ‘you should get wine for me, otherwise I will not tell you a thing’). Her memories spill out of her compulsively, indicating the fragility of the boundary around the self and the disintegrating effect of untenable narratives about the past. Moments of pain and shame, such as drowning her own daughter’s cat, lead to her vomiting, an embodied sign of overwhelming affect: ‘Begann zu kotzen. Kotzte alle Katzen und alle Katzenerinnerungen aus sich heraus’ (81: ‘Began to vomit. Vomited all the cats and the cat memories out of her’). Laughter is also a means of self-emptying and self negation: ‘Hilde beginnt zu Lachen. Lacht in das ängstliche Gesicht der Tochter. Lacht die streichelnden Hände fort. [...] Lacht sich in die Finsternis’ (81: ‘she begins to laugh. Laughs in the concerned face of the daughter. Laughs the stroking hands away. Laughs herself into the darkness’). In *Februarschatten*, the mouth symbolises the foreclosure of intersubjectivity as well as the mark of stigma (Hilde’s alcoholism embarrasses her daughter), difference (as an elderly woman with a wrinkled mouth she is marginalised: ‘Falten von der Nase zum Mund’, 83) and rejection from her community where the speech of others is prioritised over her orality (‘Jeder Platz ist von deinen Worten besetzt,’ 10: ‘Every space is occupied by your speech’). Plus, she has not got a sense of ownership of her speech, diminishing her agency over her discourse as a woman, and as a participant in one of the most significant massacres by civilians during the Second World War: ‘Ein Schrei weckte Hilde. Ein Schrei von dem sie nicht wußte, wie oft in letzter Zeit, ob er aus ihr gekommen war oder von draußen.’<sup>486</sup> In *Februarschatten* the mouth is a source of relief, in its compulsive emissions of toxic memories and violent speech, as well as a tormenting boundary symbolising shameful speechlessness, enforced self-censorship and bodily intimidation through the violence of others.

This mouth that symbolises the impossibility of affection or communication communicates only in ‘Satzfetzen’ (88: ‘Shreds of sentences’) conveying the porosity of Hilde’s narrative, shredded by overpowering black holes of guilt at her participation in her brother’s murder. Like ‘Mouth’ in Samuel Beckett’s 1972 *Not I*, a short play dramatising how orality enacts female marginalisation, the mouth testifies to the shame and compulsiveness of a fragmented life through a sentence structure resonating with *Februarschatten*’s privileging

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<sup>486</sup> 94: ‘A cry awoke Hilde. A cry, which did not know, as happened so often recently, whether it came from her or from elsewhere.’



of a breakdown of syntax, parataxis and ellipsis which represent the disintegration of narrative cohesion reflected in the fragility and permeability of the body:

speechless all her days... practically speechless... even to herself... never out loud... but not completely... sometimes... a sudden urge to... tell... then rush out stop the first she saw... nearest lavatory... start pouring out... steady stream... mad stuff... half the vowels wrong... no one could follow ... till she saw the stare she was getting... then die of shame... crawl back in... always winter for some strange reason.<sup>487</sup>

Hilde's disparate speech acts also feature this same elliptical self-correction: 'Die Schmerzen beim Erinnern – Dagegen ist die Leere nach dem Vergessen angenehm. Angenehm? Dieses Gefühl, *kalt zu werden*' (22: 'the pains of remembering – As opposed to those the emptiness after forgetting is pleasant. This feeling of *getting cold*.' emph. in original). Like Hilde, Mouth narrates compulsively but self-interrupts to avoid bringing moments of pain or guilt to the forefront of consciousness:

... guilty or not guilty... stand up woman... speak up woman... stood there staring into space... mouth half open as usual... waiting to be led away... now this... something she had to tell... how it was... how she-... what? ... has been?... yes...<sup>488</sup>

The unnerving proximity and unsayability of the event that Hilde is trying to disavow through acts of repressive orality (such as biting her lips, vomiting, excessive drinking) is refracted into self-negating and victimising statements similar to Beckett's deferring questions and interruptions: 'Es war zu nahe. Es reichte fast an die Wahrheit hinter den Schatten [...] Vergessen die ungerechten Strafen. Vergessen die aufgegebenen Wünsche [...] Vergessen die Scham wegen der Armut. Das Lachen über sie' (41: 'It was too close. It almost reached the truth behind the shadows. Forgot the unfair punishments. Forgot the abandoned dreams. Forget the shame of poverty. People laughing at her.'). The mouth is a 'godforsaken hole', a place of compulsive avowals and rejections, that both sutures narrative gaps and tears them asunder.<sup>489</sup> Beckett's *Not I* and Reichart's *Februarschatten* crystallise the separation of self and other through a process of marginalisation and differentiation performed by an oral act by 'Mouth' as well as symbolising the physical pressure exerted by the fragmentary past on the speaker.

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<sup>487</sup> Samuel Beckett, 'Not I' [1972], *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber, 1986), pp. 371-383, p.382.

<sup>488</sup> *Ibid.*, p.374.

<sup>489</sup> *Ibid.*, p.373,382.

It is in the response to Mouth's agonising speeches that the comparison is most fruitful: In *Not I*, Mouth is observed by a silent cloaked figure – the Auditor – who stands still but for four movements indicating gestures of 'helpless compassion.'<sup>490</sup> Hilde is constantly observed by her daughter but we are initially only privy to her questions via her mother's deferred answers. While Mitgutsch's approach in *Die Züchtigung* leaves the mother's influence unmetabolised as it resonates without being integrated into the fabric of an interdependent self with a fully-fledged historical agency, Reichart's text accommodates the mother's voice, with its contradictions and disavowals in a way that empowers, rather than undermines the narrator:

Schwieriger, die ambivalenten Gefühle auszuhalten, welche die Erzählerin überfallen, während sie nicht nur in eine Figur, auch in sich selbst eine Tiefschicht nach der anderen anhebt. Haß und Mitleid, Abscheu und Verständnis, Verzweiflung und Schuld – die auch wieder nur an den Reaktionen der Mutter abzulesen ist.<sup>491</sup>

Attentiveness to interpersonal relations and the lasting 'Prägung' of the past equates to tracing the 'receptivity' at the centre of creaturely life. For Thomas Menely:

Passions [defined here as 'reflective impressions'] produced by way of communicative receptivity, reverberation and intensification [...] are sympathetically mediated, for they take shape only as we situate ourselves, compare and contrast ourselves, among other passionate expressive beings.<sup>492</sup>

In other words, the transgenerational dynamic at play here is sympathetic, in that it allows space for the suffering of the other, but it also situates this narration within a wider context of the urgency to reckon with salient pasts. The past materialises through its inscriptions on the body which distils the lasting reverberations of war, persecution and violence with more impact than any abstract cognitive appraisal, which Reichart's text flinches away from. Hence, I see it as the epitome of Nel Noddings' ethic of interpersonal communication whereby 'caring is an ethics that allows action through interpersonality.'<sup>493</sup> As Christa Wolf notes in her afterword to the text, attentiveness to way in which the subject is dynamically created in a way that accommodates its contractions is the true triumph of Reichart's *Februarschatten*:

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<sup>490</sup> *Ibid*, p.372.

<sup>491</sup> Christa Wolf, 'Struktur der Erinnerung' in Elisabeth Reichart, *Februarschatten* (Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1985), pp.117-119, p.118: 'It is more difficult to sustain the ambivalent feelings that overwhelm the narrator while she discloses one deep layer after another not only in one character but also within herself. Hatred and pity, disgust and understanding, despair and guilt, which can only be read from the reactions of the mother.'

<sup>492</sup> Menely, p.61.

<sup>493</sup> Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p.24.

Die Tatsache, dass ein anderer Umgang mit Menschen als der mörderische, über den sie schreibt, nicht deklariert wird, sondern als aufmerksames Verhalten der Autorin zu ihren Figuren in die innere Struktur des Buches eingegangen ist.<sup>494</sup>

In this way, Georgina Paul's notion of the masculine quest for the 'redemption of the self or of history' is shown to be within sight through a women's idiom based on a relation based on the creaturely responsiveness to caring attention.<sup>495</sup> For Noddings, the feminine is defined as 'receptivity, relatedness, responsiveness' and her assessment of the need for the courage to care in the face of despicable and haunting pasts is particularly salient here: 'there is a double requirement of courage in caring: I must have the courage to accept that which I have had a hand in, and I must have the courage to go on caring.'<sup>496</sup> In this way Reichart's novella promotes an ethics of care which relies on the interdependence of self and other which according to Carol Gilligan 'delineates a path not only to a less violent life but also to a maturity realised through interdependence and taking care.'<sup>497</sup> Erika's attentiveness to her mother's atomised experiences, and her unflinching search for the truth behind her disavowal allows for the kind of compassion that could revolutionise approaches to a difficult past through a compassionate lens without diminishing the agent's responsibility and enable a pragmatic ethics of narrative caring enabling those embedded in and embodying a dangerous past to finally come to terms with it, honestly.

### **Concluding remarks**

In conclusion, both authors mobilise intergenerational communication as a generative though unreliable and multivalent discourse which relies on an alert reader to account for the inconsistencies and narrative slippages where atomised versions of the past, of the self, and of relationships compete for viability. Whereas Mitgutsch's text offers a pessimistic account of how maternal generation prolongs overwhelming narrations of suffering across the generations, leaving in doubt the possibility of unpacking personal identity and national identity through the sedimentation of these narratives, Reichart's *Februarschatten* creates a discursive space where an attention to the interlocutor's pain can be investigated while maintaining historical rigour and an honest search for manifestations of agency. This enables the tenacious and redemptive victim-centric and creaturely interpretation of the past to be

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<sup>494</sup> Wolf, p. 119.

<sup>495</sup> Georgina Paul, *Perspectives on Gender in Post-1945 German Literature* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2009), p.43.

<sup>496</sup> Noddings, p.2,39.

<sup>497</sup> Carole Gilligan, *In a different voice* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1982), p.25.

addressed in a way that does not demobilise historical agency and still acknowledges the reality of past suffering. Thus, affect and reason, instinctive and acquired behaviours, vulnerability and agency can be reconciled and accommodated. The final chapter of this thesis turns to Primo Levi and Ilse Aichinger and will investigate how an author's appeal to an attentive reader may balance the ethical imperative to attend to the other's suffering while broadening and redefining a monolithic definition of the human in the aftermath of genocidal persecution in Fascist Italy and the Third Reich.

## **Chapter Four: ‘Wir müssen gelenkiger werden’: Creatures, Humanity and Testimony in Ilse Aichinger and Primo Levi’s short prose.**

In *Negative Dialektik*, Adorno notes that the only legitimate engagement with the unprecedented suffering and violence of the Second World War and the Holocaust can take place at a bodily, and not discursive level:

Hitler hat den Menschen im Stande ihrer Unfreiheit einen neuen kategorischen Imperativ aufgezwungen: ihr Denken und Handeln so einzurichten, dass Auschwitz nicht sich wiederhole, nichts Ähnliches geschehe [...] Ihn [The Holocaust–AH] diskursiv zu behandeln, wäre Frevel: an ihm lässt leibhaft das Moment des Hinzutretenden am Sittlichen sich fühlen. Leibhaft, weil es der praktisch gewordene Abscheu vor dem unerträglichen physischen Schmerz ist, dem die Individuen ausgesetzt sind, auch nachdem Individualität, als geistige Reflexionsform, zu verschwinden sich anschickt. Nur im ungeschminkt materialischen Motiv überlebt Moral.<sup>498</sup>

This provocative formulation situates the legacy of the Holocaust at a bodily level that defies discursive categories. Past suffering demands material attention in the context of post-Holocaust writing for Adorno. For Scarry, suffering has a profound creaturely impact: ‘Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.’<sup>499</sup> Who can speak for the suffering body, or indeed for the body that has no narrative potential in the first place, such as that of the non-human, animal body? Adorno’s materialistic motive comes close to Michael Minden’s interpretation of the creaturely as a narrative problem. For Minden, modernist literature is permeated by ‘a pervasive excess of human, fleshy presence, beyond what the faces and narratives, the systems of modern administration can [...] utilise or contain.’<sup>500</sup> Indeed, Kafka already dramatizes the end of the communicative function of language in the administrated world of *In der Strafkolonie*: ‘Es wäre nutzlos es [das Urteil-AH] ihm [dem Verurteilten-AH] zu verkünden, er erfährt es am eigenen Leib.’<sup>501</sup> Creatureliness, in Minden’s view, represents the paradox of narrating this fleshy excess, of accounting for this ‘personal experience [which] becomes representable as that which refuses to coincide with the narrative determinations from which it is nevertheless inseparable.’<sup>502</sup>

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<sup>498</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1966), p.356.

<sup>499</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.4.

<sup>500</sup> Michael Minden, *Modern German Literature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), pp.337-38.

<sup>501</sup> Franz Kafka, ‘In der Strafkolonie’, *Sämtliche Erzählungen* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1993), pp.100-122, p.104.

<sup>502</sup> Minden, p.335.

My aim in this chapter is to compare Primo Levi and Ilse Aichinger's treatment of 'creaturely life' in their short prose dating from 1948 to 1966. By comparing two authors whose writings are linked by a single point of reference – namely the Holocaust and its aftermath – this chapter firstly analyses the importance of the hybridity of humans and animals that, in my view, represents the fleshy reminder of racial persecution in the works of Ilse Aichinger and Primo Levi. As Anat Pick notes, 'cultural anxiety over species identity determines the way in which the Holocaust is and is not represented.'<sup>503</sup> Animals permeate Holocaust discourse in the sense that they are a metaphor for both the degraded human being as well as the incitement to scapegoating that underlies racial persecution of those who are 'like animals.' Both discourses underline a desirable split from the animal whereby post-Holocaust discourse must dedicate itself to what Pick calls 'the salvaging of humanity', and racist, exclusionary practices are based on the valorisation of the human against a generalised animal 'other'.<sup>504</sup> I argue that Levi and Aichinger are troubled by the speciesism the Holocaust and its aftermath forces them to confront, and therefore problematize the validity of hybridity as an ethical value that bridges the binarisms of human/animal and self/other. Secondly, I analyse how the 'creaturely life' in Aichinger and Levi defines attitudes to shame and persecution as a traumatic symptom of past suffering. The theory of 'creatureliness' may, on the one hand, help go beyond the animal/human distinction which has marked much Holocaust discourse and avoid falling into the trap of compulsively repeating the dehumanising consequences of persecution and entering the vicious circle of discrimination, dehumanisation and violence. On the other, 'creatureliness' invites further questions about passivity (etymologically, creatures are 'created' and imply a 'creator') and victimhood, insofar as embodiment may indicate all of life's vulnerability to suffering. As I will argue in this chapter, the way in which creatureliness engages traumatisation bring out discomforts surrounding national identity and the burden of the past in Aichinger and Levi. Lastly, I will compare how Aichinger and Levi's creaturely poetics of a past contaminated by violence and its fleshy reminders gauge both authors' roles in the elaboration of national identity and Holocaust remembrance in post-war Italy and post-*Anschluss* Austria.

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<sup>503</sup> Anat Pick, *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p.24.

<sup>504</sup> *Ibid.* p.25.

## Hybridity and 'Mischlingdasein': Ilse Aichinger and Primo Levi's blurred biographies.

Ilse Aichinger, born in Vienna in 1921 to a Jewish mother and a gentile father, was both a witness to and a victim of the vilification and persecution of Austria's Jews after Austria's adoption of the Nuremberg racial laws of 1935 following the Third Reich's *Anschluss* of Austria in 1938. Aichinger's father, a teacher, dissolved his marriage the same year, and Aichinger's twin sister, Helga, escaped to England, leaving Ilse with her mother, a doctor barred from practising medicine as a Jew but not deported as the mother of a half-Aryan child under twenty-one years old.<sup>505</sup> However, Aichinger's maternal grandmother and aunts were deported in 1944, and died in Minsk concentration camp. Thus, she owes her survival to a strategic intersection of legality and race, of politics and biology which constitute major themes in her work.<sup>506</sup> Despite her personal tragedy, Aichinger stated in an interview almost half a century later, that the war had been a powerful formative experience that would have a resounding impact on her work: "Der Krieg war meine glücklichste Zeit. Der Krieg war hilfreich für mich. Was ich da mitangesehen habe, war für mich das Wichtigste im Leben. Die Kriegszeit war voller Hoffnung. [...] Der Krieg hat Dinge geklärt."<sup>507</sup> Indeed, Richard Reichensperger defines her writing as 'eine Sprache des Leidens, der verwundbar bleibenden Hoffnung und der rückhaltslosen Parteinahme für die Außenseiter, die Unterliegenden, die in der Alltags- und Weltgeschichte getretenen.'<sup>508</sup> Indeed, suffering, victimhood and redemption are key words in the reception of her writing which is discomfiting because of her writing's oblique approach to a subject matter that was to define Aichinger's entire thought.

Her first novel, *Die größere Hoffnung* published in Amsterdam in 1948, whose half-Jewish child protagonist Ellen replaces her 'große Hoffnung' of escaping Vienna with the 'größere Hoffnung' of finding acceptance, redemption and salvation as one of the victims of persecution was seen by early critics as 'Ausdruck einer persönlichen Krise, die als Symbol einer Gesamtkrise gelten kann', in other words a document of a general malaise with which critics

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<sup>505</sup> For more on Aichinger's early years, see Dagmar C. Lorenz, *Ilse Aichinger* (Königstein: Athenäum Verlag, 1981), p.15. Manuel Esser, "'Die Vögel beginnen noch zu singen wenn es finster ist' – Auszug aus einem Gespräch mit Ilse Aichinger' in *Ilse Aichinger: Leben und Werk*, ed. by Samuel Moser (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2003), pp.47-58, p.49. As Bukey confirms, men were more vulnerable than women to racial persecution in the case of so-called interracial marriages and few Jewish women with children married or formerly married to 'Aryan' husbands were deported. See Evan Barr Bukey, *Jews and Intermarriage in postwar Austria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.153ff.

<sup>506</sup> Bukey cites case files which categorise interracial marriages and their offspring according to biological 'classifications' of 'Mischlinge of first degree', 'of second degree' etc., p.75.

<sup>507</sup> 'Ilse Aichinger wird 75: Ein Gespräch mit Iris Radisch', *Die Zeit*, 1.11.1996.

<sup>508</sup> Richard Reichensperger, 'Die Bergung der Opfer in der Sprache' in Moser, pp.83-98, p.83.

and readers could identify no matter their own pasts.<sup>509</sup> Told from the perspective of the child victim, Ellen's story acted as a mouthpiece for a society in denial of its crimes. For instance, Walter Jens, writing in 1960, suggests that the novel depicted a sufficiently all-encompassing post-war reality even though the story is filtered through the perspective of an innocent half-Jewish child, who is excluded and eventually killed, and therefore whose experience would not have matched that of the majority of Austrians: 'Die peinliche Vermeidung aller Realien, der Verzicht auf die vertrauten Namen, Begriffe und Vorstellungen, gab den Konturen eine nicht minder grimmige Akkuratess als der Beleg. Kein Hitler, kein SD, kein Auschwitz [...]: und doch die ganze Wirklichkeit.'<sup>510</sup> The novel's insistence on hope even in death and martyrdom, which provided a religious inflexion of past events also resonates with the desire for renewal and redemption after the war. Erich Fried describes the book as 'tiefreligiös christlich': 'in den wundersam mühelosen Übergängen aus dem Diesseitigen ins Jenseitige offenbart sich christliches Empfinden.'<sup>511</sup>

Yet the success of the novel was short-lived, and the scholarly debate about the reason for *Die größere Hoffnung*'s obscurity and her famed short stories reveals Aichinger's discomfiting role in post-war Austrian cultural life. Her short story 'Spiegelgeschichte' won the Gruppe 47 prize and, according to Peter Härtling in his 1980 essay, this obscured her importance as post-war Austrian Holocaust writer. Instead, Härtling cites Hans Georg Brenner's appraisal of the story as 'die seltsamste, zarteste deutsche Prosa der Nachkriegszeit, ein unheimlich vibrierendes Geheimnis, das sich keusch verhüllt.'<sup>512</sup> Thus, Härtling argued that many saw her as an exponent of hermetic, linguistic experimentation, defined as 'eine poetische Fluchtbewegung, die kennzeichnend ist für den restaurativen Geist der Adenauer-Epoche', which, for Härtling, is a misreading of the potential for 'der sanfte und energische Widerstand der Aichingerschen Prosa.'<sup>513</sup> In his 1980 'Freundschaftlicher Widerspruch' to Härtling, Joachim Kaiser states that it was not the success of 'Spiegelgeschichte' that drew attention away from *Die größere Hoffnung* but rather the discomfiting honesty of her poetic vision: 'Dass Ilse Aichingers poetische Gewalt sich auch von so Schrecklichem wie der

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<sup>509</sup> Karl August Horst, 'In extremis' in Moser, pp.166-169, p.166.

<sup>510</sup> Walter Jens, 'Ilse Aichingers erster Roman' in Moser, pp.169-173, p.169.

<sup>511</sup> Erich Fried, 'Die größere Hoffnung' [1948] in Moser, pp.155-156, p.156.

<sup>512</sup> Cited by Peter Härtling, 'Ein Buch das geduldig auf uns wartet' in Moser, pp.173-179, p.175.

<sup>513</sup> *Ibid.*



Judenverfolgung und KZ nicht zügeln ließ: es war nicht so leicht zu ertragen. ... Heute wäre es an der Zeit.<sup>514</sup>

However, the perceived hermeticism of Aichinger's poetics have obscured the importance of her engagement with Austria's past and her insistence on 'Mischlingdasein' as an ethical category in the face of exclusion and persecution. Indeed, many critics dehistoricise Aichinger by discussing what Hillary Hope Herzog has called her 'nonreferential' language.<sup>515</sup> Heinz Schaftroth assesses her politics of 'Sprachskepsis',<sup>516</sup> and Barbara Thums calls attention to Aichinger's 'Poetik des Vergessens' and to the transcendental and mythopoetic elements of her prose and poetry.<sup>517</sup> Annette Rattman's 2001 monograph traces the importance of silence and death in her work.<sup>518</sup>

Recent scholarship has re-interpreted Aichinger as a post-Holocaust Jewish writer. Dagmar Lorenz's 2006 essay 'Imagined Identities: Children and Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors in Literature' examines Aichinger's use of Catholic tropes to convey the Jewish Holocaust, building on her inclusion of Aichinger in her anthology of German-Jewish women writers after 1945,<sup>519</sup> and Allyson Fiddler considers Aichinger's break with the Gruppe 47 to be path-breaking for subsequent Austrian women's writing (although that did not actually impact on the feminist reception of her own work).<sup>520</sup> Manuela Gerlof focuses on the East German reception of her radio play *Knöpfe* (1961)<sup>521</sup>, and Hillary Hope Herzog features Aichinger in her 2011 overview of Jewish writers in Austria from the late nineteenth century to the present

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<sup>514</sup> Joachim Kaiser 'Freundschaftlicher Widerspruch'[1980] in Moser, p.179-182, p.181.

<sup>515</sup> Hillary Hope Herzog, *Vienna is Different: Jewish Writers in Austria from the Fin de Siecle to the Present* (Berghahn 2011), p.192.

<sup>516</sup> Heinz Schaftroth, 'Ilse Aichinger' in *Kritisches Lexicon zur deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur* (München: Text und Kritik, 1978), pp.1-12, p.7

<sup>517</sup> Barbara Thums, 'Poetik des Vergessens' in *Was wir einsetzen können ist Nüchternheit: Zum Werk Ilse Aichingers* ed. by Britta Hermann and Barbara Thums (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2001), pp.93-107; See also Barbara Thums, 'Die Ankünfte nicht glauben / wahr sind die Abschiede': *Mythos, Gedächtnis und Mystik in der Prosa Ilse Aichingers* (Freiburg im Bresgau, 2000)

<sup>518</sup> Annette Ratman, *Spiegelungen. Ein Tanz: Untersuchung zur Prosa und Lyrik Ilse Aichingers* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2001)

<sup>519</sup> Dagmar C. Lorenz, 'Imagined Identities: Children and Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors in Literature.' in *German Memory Contests: The Quest for Identity in Literature and Film since 1990*, ed. by Anne Fuchs, Mary Cosgrove and Georg Grote (NY: Camden House, 2006), p.169-192; Dagmar C. Lorenz, *Keepers of the Motherland: German Texts by Jewish Women Writers* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1997), pp.151-160.

<sup>520</sup> Allyson Fiddler, 'Post-war Austrian Women Writers' in, *Post-War Women's Writing in German: Feminist Critical Approaches*, ed. by Chris Wheedon (Oxford: Berghahn, 1997), pp.243-68, particularly, pp.246-7. Fiddler also points to many allusions to Aichinger's work in the work of her contemporary Ingeborg Bachmann. Aichinger has also stated that she and Bachmann were close friends and colleagues. See Esser, in Moser, p.51.

<sup>521</sup> Manuela Gerlof, *Tonspuren: Erinnerung an den Holocaust im Hörspiel der DDR* (Berlin: W de Gruyter, 2010)

in *Vienna is Different*. Furthermore, Aichinger's affinity with Kafka's work in the context of German-Jewish writing has been explored in two works in English.<sup>522</sup>

Thus, Aichinger's short stories and first novel can be understood as a corpus seeking to account for 'die Traumzeichen der Nachkriegszeit.'<sup>523</sup> From the outset, her official status as 'Mischling' during the Third Reich has come to inflect her aesthetic and world view: 'die Rolle, die man hier auf der Welt überhaupt als Mensch spielt, hat etwas von diesem Mischlingsdasein an sich.'<sup>524</sup> Richard Reichensperger regards the experience of persecution as the catalyst for her writing ('die Todeserfahrung – auch diejenigen des Weltkriegs – als Ausgangspunkt eines neuen Erzählens'),<sup>525</sup> grounded in the experience of persecution and victimhood: 'Überall sind die Opfer wichtiger [als die Helden], selbst in den Romanen.'<sup>526</sup> Thus, hybridity, the trauma of war and the privileging of victimhood emerge as the crucible of Aichinger's literary work, and this chapter is the first attempt to contextualise Aichinger's early short stories and her use of animal imagery in them within the negotiation of Austria's wartime past and the Holocaust.

In contradiction to Andrew Barker's assertion that Austrian literary culture in the immediate post-war period was 'unambitious,'<sup>527</sup> I hope this chapter will recontextualise Ilse Aichinger in light of what Liska has called 'her insufficiently acknowledged early contribution to post-Holocaust poetics,' by offering a comparative and transnational reading of her early short prose with Primo Levi's.<sup>528</sup> I hope to follow Christine Ivanovic and Sugi Shindo's call for a revision of Aichinger's work along comparative and translational lines to tease out her impact and contribution to post-war historical narratives via her thematisation of animals and

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<sup>522</sup> Members of the Gruppe 47 referred to Aichinger as 'Fräulein Kafka', but in her 1983 Kafka prize acceptance speech, Aichinger claimed never to have read more than a few lines of Kafka's due to their shattering effect. See Kleist, Moos, Fasane (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1991), p.106. See Ralf R. Nikolai, 'Ilse Aichinger's Response to Kafka in "The Bound Man"' in *The Legacy of Kafka in Contemporary Austrian Literature*, ed. by Frank Philipp (Riverside: Ariadne, 1997), pp.44-61; Vivian Liska, "'Und dieser Schatten wird mir streifen, solange ich atme'" - Ilse Aichinger und Kafka' in *Was wir einsetzen können ist Nüchternheit: Zum Werk Ilse Aichingers* ed. by Barbara Thums, Brita Hermann (Königshausen & Neumann, 2001), pp.79-88. Vivian Liska's 2009 book *When Kafka says "We": Uncommon Communities in German-Jewish Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009) draws parallels between Aichinger's and Kafka's works and takes a gendered and intertextual approach to questions of German-Jewish identity in both authors.

<sup>523</sup> Jens, p.171.

<sup>524</sup> Esser, p.50.

<sup>525</sup> Richard Reichensperger, 'Die Bergung der Opfer in der Sprache' in Moser, p.89.

<sup>526</sup> Ilse Aichinger, 'Fragebogen' in *FAZ*, 3.12.1993.

<sup>527</sup> Andrew Barker, 'The Politics of Austrian Literature 1927-1956', in *A History of Austrian Literature 1918-2000*, ed. by Katrin Kohl and Ritchie Robertson (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006), pp.107-125, p.120: 'The early stirrings of the Wiener Gruppe should not conceal the unambitious nature of much literary production in Austria in the immediate postwar period.'

<sup>528</sup> Vivian Liska, *When Kafka says "We": Uncommon Communities in German-Jewish Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana, 2009), p.142.

the creaturely in her work. For Shindo and Ivanovic, „eine Revision von Aichingers Gesamtwerk in internationalen Kontext wie im Kontext zeitgenössische, ästhetische, gedächtnistheoretische und kulturwissenschaftliche Anstöße ist ein dringendes Forschungsdesiderat.“<sup>529</sup>

Primo Levi, born to Jewish parents in 1919 in Turin, was captured as a member of the partisan group ‘Partito d’Azione’ in 1943, and sent from the Italian concentration camp of Fossoli to Auschwitz, where he spent eleven months until the liberation of the camp in January 1945.<sup>530</sup> Surviving thanks to his education in chemistry, which permitted him to work in the camp laboratory – the Buna – Levi described his own identity as that of a ‘centaur’, a hybrid, as a witness and writer, as a chemist and storyteller, and a Jew and an Italian: ‘io sono un anfibio, un centauro. E mi pare che l’ambiguità della fantascienza rispecchi il mio destino attuale. Io sono diviso in metà ... È una spaccatura paranoica.’<sup>531</sup> Like Aichinger’s ‘Mischlingdasein’, Levi’s hybridity lies at the heart of his poetics and encapsulates a status that spans Levi’s political and racial status as a Jew during the German occupation of Italy after 1943, his cultural identity as a writer and scientist as well as his national identity. As Robert Gordon has argued, this concern for hybridity in Levi portrays a ‘larger ethical concern with the nature of the human, its hybridity and its impurity, the nature and limits of artifice.’<sup>532</sup> In my comparison of a selection of Levi’s short stories from *Storie Naturali* and Ilse Aichinger’s works, I propose that the blurred boundaries between the human and the animal are crucial to an understanding of both authors’ post-Holocaust vocabularies, and that their privileging of animal vocabularies problematizes the understanding of the Holocaust as an event whose inhumanity paradoxically demands a ‘humanist’ response. My understanding of the creaturely in both sets of texts enables an engagement with the biopolitically modified human as a result of his entrapment in the will of others, and therefore invites the connection of creatureliness to agency and to shame, a profoundly dehumanising and boundary-shattering experience. Nezri-Dufour notes that Levi’s experience at Auschwitz made his preoccupation with animals inevitable: ‘son experience ayant fait de lui le témoin des pires bestialités, la référence à

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<sup>529</sup> Christine Ivanovic and Sugi Shindo, ‘Geschichte und Medien in Ilse Aichinger: Einleitung’ in *Absprung zur Weiterbesinnung: Geschichte und Medien bei Ilse Aichinger*, ed. by Christine Ivanovic and Sugi Shindo (Tübingen: Stauffenberg, 2011), pp.7-13, p.8.

<sup>530</sup> Ian Thomson, *Primo Levi: A Life* (London: Random House, 2003), pp.129-176.

<sup>531</sup> Primo Levi, *Conversazioni e interviste: 1963-1987* (Torino: Einaudi, 1997), p.106.

<sup>532</sup> Robert S.C. Gordon, *Primo Levi’s Ordinary Virtues: From Testimony to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.194.

l'animal devient incontournable.'<sup>533</sup> Yet, it is important to question the automatic link of the animal to the experience of brutalisation and victimisation at Auschwitz by teasing out what this equation reveals about attitudes to animality and human agency.<sup>534</sup>

*Storie Naturali*, Primo Levi's first short story collection, was published in 1966 under the pseudonym Damiano Malabaila though Levi began working on several stories in the collection as early as 1946. Alberto Cavaglion argues that in 1958 Morpurgo's optimistic 'Volare!' represented a cultural watershed for post-war Italy; now, a new generation of Italians could look towards a brighter future, 'un sogno possibile, la fine dell'Italia povera e umiliata del dopoguerra.'<sup>535</sup> With this profession of faith in a new Italy of economic recovery and consumerist values, tending towards social homologation in the name of economic and social progress, Cavaglion notes that Levi's *La Tregua*, published in 1963, was now out of step with the cultural tone of the new optimistic Italy: 'la narrazione afflittiva non ha diritto di cittadinanza nella Repubblica delle lettere.'<sup>536</sup> The need for progress and forgetting, not only the atrocities of the post-war years, but also the uncomfortable complicities with the Fascist and Nazi dictatorships meant that Levi's stories of 'affliction', *Se questo è un uomo* and *La Tregua* no longer had a place in post-war Italy.

On the sleeve of the first edition of *Storie Naturali*, the author affirms that he is writing in response to 'una smagliatura del mondo in cui viviamo, di una falla piccola o grossa, di un "vizio di forma" che vanifica uno od altro aspetto della nostra civiltà o del nostro universo morale.'<sup>537</sup> Thus, a formal defect, or aberration lies at the centre of his motivation to write these short-stories described by Italo Calvino as 'fantabiologici'.<sup>538</sup> Levi's new direction disappointed many readers: 'Perchè da questa opera di cronaca autobiografica ispirate di un'altissima pietà per la condizione umana in cui sono accomunti persecutori e perseguitati, Levi è passato a questi racconti di fantasia ironica assurda?'<sup>539</sup> Yet Levi/Malabaila assures his

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<sup>533</sup> Sophie Nezri-Dufour, 'Le bestiaire poétique de Primo Levi', *Italies* 10: 2006, pp.251-269, p.256: 'Having been made a witness of the worst bestialities by his experience, his reference to the animal becomes unavoidable.'

<sup>534</sup> For a taxonomy and catalogue of Levi's animals, see Jane Nystedt, 'Primo Levi e il mondo animale' in *Actes du XIIIe Congrès des Études Scandinaves* ed. by Gerhard Boysen (Aalborg: Aalborg University Press, 1993), pp.407-419.

<sup>535</sup> Cavaglion, p.121.

<sup>536</sup> *Ibid.*, p.125.

<sup>537</sup> The term 'vizio di forma' is legal jargon for a 'breach of procedure' as Roberto Farneti translates it in 'Of Humans and Other Portentous Beings', *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Summer 2006). However, 'vizio' can also mean defect, error or aberration and forma, can mean body, shape, structure which bears bodily as well as legal and moral significance.

<sup>538</sup> Italo Calvino, *Lettere* (Milano: Mondadori, 2000), p.695.

<sup>539</sup> 'A Primo Levi il premio Bagutta', *Corriere della Sera*, 15.01.1967: 'Why has Levi moved onto these fantastic, absurd, ironic stories from his autobiographical work inspired by an utmost compassion for the human condition in which persecutors and persecuted are one and the same?'

readers of the continuity between his Auschwitz experience (which he described as being ‘una gigantesca esperienza biologica e sociale’/ ‘a giant biological and social experiment’)<sup>540</sup> and his explorations of the hybridity of man and animal as a result of human manipulation: ‘Ebbene non le pubblicherei se non mi fossi accorto (non subito è vero) che tra il Lager e queste invenzioni una continuità, un ponte esiste: per me il Lager è stato il più grosso dei vizi dei stravolgimenti di cui dicevo prima, il più mostruoso dei mostri generati dal sonno della ragione.’<sup>541</sup> Levi’s autobiographical and science-fiction stories hinge on a ‘vizio’: an aberration, deformation, breach, whose moral aspect spills over onto its embodied significance. In another contemporary interview, Levi adds that the exposure of man to an enslaving force forms the crux of his literary oeuvre from his Auschwitz works to *Storie Naturali*: ‘esiste un legame intimo tra l’opera precedente e questo mio ultimo libro. In entrambe vi è l’uomo ridotto a schiavitù da una cosa: “la cosa nazista” e la “cosa cosa”, cioè la macchina. Sempre il sonno della ragione genera mostri.’<sup>542</sup> Charlotte Ross’s insightful study on the nature of embodiment in Primo Levi has been inspirational for this chapter as she argues for ‘the primacy of the body as the bearer and location of experience and memory.’<sup>543</sup> By linking embodiment, animality and creatureliness to notions of victimhood and national identity, I will add to Ross’ important insights on Levi’s work by assessing *Storie Naturali* in the Italian post-war context. Marco Belpoliti notes that Levi’s animals are the manifestation of a Freudian ‘return of the repressed’, phantoms of the Lager that transmogrify into new figurations, thereby revealing the percolation of the foundational experience of Auschwitz throughout Levi’s entire literary work: ‘[un fantasma che] torna a visitarlo a distanza di tempo sotto forma di sogno, incubo, come un *revenant*, un vero e proprio fantasma diurno.’<sup>544</sup> As Robert Gordon notes, ‘the recourse to animal imagery marks a moment of acute ethical reflection,’ and in my view, the animal-like ‘vizi di forma’, embodied or formal glitches, are linked to discomfiting creaturely experience of biopolitical exposure, to institutional enslavement as well as anxiety-inducing challenges to the dynamic of inclusion and exclusion within a human community.<sup>545</sup>

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<sup>540</sup> Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* (Torino: Einaudi, 2005), p.23.

<sup>541</sup> Damiano Malabaila, *Storie Naturali* (Torino: Einaudi 1966), Back matter: ‘Well I would not publish them if I had not realised (though not at once, I admit) that between the Lager and these inventions, a continuity, a bridge exists: for me the Lager was the greatest of aberrations, of deformations that I spoke of earlier, the most monstrous of all the monsters generated by the dreams of reason.’

<sup>542</sup> Primo Levi, *Conversazioni ed interviste 1963-1987*, ed. by Marco Belpoliti (Torino: Einaudi 1997), p.150.

<sup>543</sup> Charlotte Ross, *Primo Levi’s Narratives of Embodiment: Containing the Human* (New York: Routledge, 2010). p.3.

<sup>544</sup> Marco Belpoliti, ‘Animali e Fantasmi’ in Primo Levi, *L’ultimo natale di guerra* (Torino: Einaudi, 2002), pp.131-141, p.139.

<sup>545</sup> Gordon, 2001, p.98.

## Policing the boundaries of the species in *Quaestio de Centauris*

As this brief overview has shown ‘Mischlingdasein’ and ‘hybridity’ are key ways of inflecting post-war human identity through an assessment of the human/animal limit, as the next section will show. First, I will examine *Quaestio de Centauris* (1961), a story about hybridity, and the investments in and anxieties surrounding the human/animal boundary and their implications for an engagement with persecution, differentiation and exclusion in a post-Holocaust context.

*Quaestio de Centauris* is narrated by a man who owns a centaur named Trachi from Salonika who has been the property of his family for many years: ‘mio padre lo teneva in stalla’ /‘my father kept him in the stable’ (Q112). Despite his family’s warnings not to approach the centaur, who is half-horse, half-man, the narrator claims to have spent many happy moments with him, as Trachi can interact with human beings: ‘aveva imparato la nostra lingua abbastanza bene’/‘he had learnt our language quite well’(Q112). The narrator goes onto explain the origins of the centaur, born during the ‘second creation’ caused by the draining of the waters after the Flood (Noah, inventor and saviour of the ultra-intelligent human race, at the apex of the species hierarchy, saved only the ‘key species’ (*le specie chiave*) of every genus). Centaurs originated from the initial union of a Thessalonian horse with one of the few remaining human survivors of the flood (Q114). Centaurs possess man’s intelligence as well as the intuition of any form of ‘germinazione animale, umana o vegetale’/‘human, animal or vegetal germination’ (Q118). Trachi’s hybrid nature and foreignness (‘conserva[va] un leggero accento levantino’/‘he had retained a slight Levantine accent’, Q112) foreshadow the split between Trachi and the narrator, demonstrating the narrator’s desire to police the biological boundaries of the human species and rein in Trachi’s desire for the sake of the continuity and non-contamination of the human race.

Trachi admits to the narrator that he has fallen in love with Teresa de Simone, a childhood friend of the narrator’s, and that he is ‘mutating’ due to his increasing love and desire for her; the intensification of his animal urges reflects the refinement of his human characteristics: ‘avrebbe voluto compiere imprese temerarie [...] giungere in corsa i confini del mondo, scoprire e conquistare nuove terre, ed istaurirvi opera di civiltà feconda’ (Q120). Trachi’s desire to stretch the boundaries of knowledge and enterprise reflect Ulysses’ punishment in Dante’s hell for his infringement of divinely set human limits. In *Se questo è un uomo*, Levi refers to Dante’s portrayal of Ulysses in Canto 26 of *Inferno*, where the Greek hero

exclaims: ‘Considerate la vostra semenza: fatti non foste a viver come bruti ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza.’<sup>546</sup> Ulysses is punished in Dante’s afterworld for his hubristic desire for knowledge. Yet, in Auschwitz, Levi urgently recites these lines to his friend as resistance against the dehumanisation of their enslavement: ‘devo dirgli del così umano e necessario e pure inaspettato anacronismo.’<sup>547</sup> Trachi’s Ulyssean desire to conquer unknown realms of knowledge reveals a transgression of his human nature (as the reference to Dante’s hell-bound Ulysses reveals) and is also contrary to his animal nature. Trachi’s transgressive, Ulyssean, search for knowledge and his species origin in the Flood – the symbol of man’s transgressive guilt, punished by divine violence – mark him out as a foreboding memento of the danger of transgressing boundaries and therefore countering divine authority. Indeed, Trachi has been the property of the narrator’s father’s family for generations, kept in the barn, ‘stalla’, symbolising the paternal repression of transgressive desire; the family forbids the narrator from fraternising with Trachi (‘a me, avevano severamente proibito di avvicinarlo’, Q112). Like Kafka’s creature Odradek, Trachi disturbs paternal authority by resisting it through his blurring of ontological boundaries and Levi’s tale’s conclusion seems to uphold the exclusion of the creature on the grounds of difference and unlawful transgression.<sup>548</sup>

The narrator’s attitude to Trachi’s love for his friend shows a concern about the instability of Trachi’s identity and his transgression of the human/animal divide. Because of this I disagree with Benchouicha’s argument that Levi’s work is imbibed by the ‘notion of human/bestial convergence.’<sup>549</sup> Furthermore, the narrator is aware of the nefarious consequences of a union between Trachi and Teresa, as he confirms that there are no female ‘centauresses’: only the union between a female horse and a man can have a productive union and produce the centaur. To highlight the dangers of unbridled desire, the narrator reports that women and stallions can only produce female ‘squallidi mostri’, described as ‘scarsamente vitali, infecondi, inerti e fuggitivi ... quasi vergognose della loro metà umana’/‘hardly alive, infertile, inert and elusive...almost ashamed of their human half’ (Q115). The narrator then seduces Teresa, as though to prevent her from falling prey to the deforming desire of the centaur. This unleashes Trachi’s uncontrollable sexual violence. Despite the narrator’s

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<sup>546</sup> Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* (Torino: Einaudi, 1989), p.102: ‘Consider your origin: you were not made to live as brutes, but to pursue virtue and knowledge’

<sup>547</sup> *Ibid.* p.103.

<sup>548</sup> Franz Kafka, ‘Die Sorge des Hausvaters’, *Sämtliche Erzählungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1993), p.140: ‘Sollte er also einstmals etwa noch vor den Füßen meiner Kinder und Kindeskinde mit nachschleifendem Zwirnsfaden die Treppe hinunterkollern? [...] Die Vorstellung, dass er mich auch noch überleben sollte, ist mir eine fast schmerzliche.’

<sup>549</sup> Benchouicha, p.45.

awareness of his betrayal, the description of the ferociousness of Trachi's sexual attacks on mares makes the union between the centaur and Teresa even more undesirable and reinstates the validity of the human male-female union, suggesting that female desire should be policed for the well-being of the species and the cohesion of the human community. Indeed, Trachi cannot produce offspring of his species. He is a recessive form as his offspring are described as 'very normal' foals (Q123). Whereas in *Il sistema periodico*, Levi describes man as a 'centaur' who is by nature torn between his mind and his body ('L'uomo è centauro, un groviglio di carne e di mente, di alito divino e di polvere'<sup>550</sup>), *Quaestio de Centauris* deploys mythical and biblical allusions in order to discipline the hybridity inherent to the human species and reinforce the necessity of 'pure' human relations. As Charlotte Ross notes, there is a notion of the human essence in Levi which is tied to our 'familiar form' on which our being depends.<sup>551</sup> Furthermore, Trachi is inherited by the narrator and the story begins 'mio padre': this suggests firstly that the struggle against the irrational, animal impulses of man is an inherited battle; secondly, the narrator's family's warnings about Trachi's violence and foreignness act as a reminder of the necessity to discriminate between self and other in order to safeguard community and species.

As Marco Belpoliti has noted in his work on the significance of animals in Levi's work, they often serve as a vehicle for the creation of an atmosphere of foreboding and revelation:

i suoi racconti contengono qualcosa di inquietante che è più evidente là dove Levi non parla tanto del Lager quanto di creature fantastiche, cambiamenti di stato, metamorfosi, invenzioni strane o inconsuete atte a riprodurre la vita, [...], materializzare i propri desideri segreti, oppure quando dà voce agli animali.<sup>552</sup>

Trachi's sexual attacks mirror the narrator's seduction and betrayal, as the violence and frequency of Trachi's mating is attributed to the monstrous passion agitating him 'la tempesta che lo agitava' and his origins in 'il fango primordiale' (120,116).<sup>553</sup> Trachi underlines the opposition Belpoliti sees in Levi's work between the human as civilised and the animal as symbolising the barbaric and disorderly: 'La parte animale, l'animale uomo è il rovescio di

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<sup>550</sup> Primo Levi, 'Argon' in *Tutti i racconti* (Torino: Einaudi, 2005), p.369. 'Man is a centaur, a mess of flesh and mind, of divine spirit and dust.'

<sup>551</sup> Charlotte Ross, p.155.

<sup>552</sup> Belpoliti, 2000), p.134: 'His stories contain something worrying that is more evident where Levi is not talking about the Lager but about fantastic creatures, changes of state, metamorphoses, strange inventions or unusual acts to reproduce life [...] to materialise secret desire, or when he gives a voice to animals.'

<sup>553</sup> Levi has noted that animals provide a hyperbolic explanatory key to human acts, and inflect human features: 'Proprio uscendo dall'isola umana, troverà ogni qualità umana moltiplicata per cento, una selva di iperboli prefabbricate' in *l'altrui mestiere* in *Opere II* (Torino: Einaudi, 1997), p.690.



quella umana, così come il Lager è il rovescio della società civilizzata.<sup>554</sup> This problematic opposition sets up the Lager as the reverse side of civilisation, just as animal is allegedly the reverse side of humanity. Trachi's hybridity is threatening to his human friend's community, and it is possible to see Levi's narrator as condoning the exclusion of Trachi. Trachi's violence, confirming the parental edict not to approach him, enables the narrator to justify his seduction of Teresa and therefore demarcates Trachi as the scapegoated other whose rejection sustains the human community and who fulfils the negative expectations of those who exclude him. Borges suggests that centaurs are 'more likely a deliberate invention and not a confusion born of ignorance' which may confirm that Trachi's difference is constructed, and self-fulfilling in order to safeguard the human.<sup>555</sup>

While Belpoliti is careful to say that in Levi, the animal and the human function similarly, but that they are "tuttavia non sovrapponibili,"<sup>556</sup> Levi maintains the value of distinguishing between human and animal to avoid reproducing the discourse and effect of dehumanisation described by Agamben in *The Open*:

the concentration camps are an experiment [de hominis natura], an extreme and monstrous attempt to decide between the human and the inhuman, which ended up ruining the very possibility of distinguishing between the two.<sup>557</sup>

Thus, despite Levi's assertions of his own hybridity as a source of privileged insight about his Holocaust experience, the narrator of *Quaestio de Centauris* shows a profound discomfort with the hybridity of man and animal, highlighted by the narrator's desire to police species and community boundaries, even at the cost of violence and betrayal. Levi's treatment of the animal/human difference in *Quaestio de Centauris* reflects anxieties about the boundaries of the human and its community, the transgression of which engenders guilt and violence.

### **Aichinger's ethics of mistrust in 'Rahels Kleider' and 'die Maus'**

Aichinger on the other hand is extremely suspicious of community in the sense of Levi's familial and neighbourly setting in *Quaestio de Centauris*. Her narrative voice disturbs discourses of victimhood and disavowal after 1945 and presents a political and ethical

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<sup>554</sup>Belpoliti 2000, p.141: 'The animal part, the animal-man is the opposite of the human part, just as the Lager is the opposite of civilisation.'

<sup>555</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p.38.

<sup>556</sup>Belpoliti 2000, p.140: 'not juxtaposable'

<sup>557</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open*, tr. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p.69.

challenge to the literary establishment. As a ‘Mischling’ Aichinger speaks from the margins of the national collective, unlike Levi, who has often been adopted as an international mouthpiece for the events of the Second World War and the Holocaust (a problem I will address later in this chapter). As a voice that counters the forgetfulness and wilful blindness to Jewish suffering in post-war Austria, Aichinger’s writings resist disavowal. As late as 1973, Marcel Reich-Ranicki underscores Jewish authors’ marginalisation from the cultural mainstream, declaring the implausibility of an unencumbered Jewish/Non-Jewish dialogue in Austria due to the tenacity of entrenched prejudices as well as ‘mortgage of guilt’ that inhibits a reintegration of Jewish victims’ voices into Austrian literary and public debate:

However one may judge the relationships between Jews and non-Jews in the first decades of our century, they were never, and probably could not be, unencumbered and natural. Given what happened between 1933 and 1945, the enormous growth of this deeply rooted bias probably requires no explanation. But where a huge mortgage of guilt burdens relationships between people, where impartiality is inconceivable, that is the point at which the call to fraternity has an unfortunate aftertaste and becomes utterly unbelievable.<sup>558</sup>

Aichinger criticises and enacts this external and internal censorship mechanism in her 1975 story ‘Rahels Kleider’ which accuses those left behind of turning a blind eye to violence occurring at the heart of the community; a theme symbolised in an earlier story ‘Die Maus’ as a refusal of attaching to any form of collectivity and the construction of an identity beyond species, community and national definitions.

In ‘Rahels Kleider’ narrator asks two provocative questions which introduce the deportation of the Jews (Rahel is an obviously Jewish name, and her forgotten clothes suggest a sudden and brutal departure): ‘*Wissen Sie vielleicht, weshalb Rahel ihre Kleider nicht mitnahm als sie fortzog?*’, and a paragraph later ‘*Oder haben Sie eine Ahnung, weshalb sich Rahel ihr Zeug nicht nachschicken läßt? Nach siebzehn Jahren?*’<sup>559</sup> When the narrator anticipates her interlocutors willingness to deny any idea as to why Rahel would leave without her clothers, she explicitly denounces the wilful denial behind this feigned ignorance: ‘Und da man von den Dingen, die man einmal weiß, keine Ahnung mehr zu haben pflegt, ja, dem Wissen über gewisse Dingen im allgemeinen nur nachjagt, um die Ahnung, die man davon hat,

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<sup>558</sup> Marcel Reich-Ranicki, *Über Ruhestörer: Juden in der deutschen Literatur* (1973), p.45. Cited by: Dagmar C. Lorenz, ‘Austrian Jewish Writers since World War Two’ in *Simon Wiesenthal Annual* No. 3, 1997, tr. Robert Maier: <http://motlc.wiesenthal.com/site/pp.asp?c=gvKVLcMVIuG&b=395041>. Last accessed: 8 June 2013.

<sup>559</sup> Ilse Aichinger, ‘Rahels Kleider’ in Ilse Aichinger, *Schlechte Wörter* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1991), pp.61-68, p.61. Emphasis in original.

zu verlieren, wäre ich im Recht.’<sup>560</sup> The story ‘Rahels Kleider’ testifies to Aichinger’s lifelong project of distrusting and questioning post-war reality – what Reichensperger describes as ‘Definieren ... das Umkreisen und Einkreisen, das Zerlegen und Offenlegen, das Unterscheiden und das Herausstellen der Einzigartigkeit von Gegenständen, Orten und Menschen’<sup>561</sup> – that Aichinger had promoted in her first essay ‘Aufruf zum Misstrauen’ published in the literary journal *Plan* in 1946.<sup>562</sup> Aichinger asks ‘Ist es nicht gerade die schwerste und unheilbarste Krankheit dieser tastenden, verwundeten, von Wehen geschüttelten Welt?’ (18) and follows with a series of open questions to the reader that feature images of disease, pain, apocalypse as well as broken bridges and blindness, suggesting the impossibility of communication. According to critic Annette Ratman, these questions function as ‘eine Fläche, auf die die LeserInnen ihre individuellen Kriegs- und Nachkriegserfahrungen projizieren können.’<sup>563</sup> The author implores the reader to experience this malaise by turning it against himself: ‘Verstehen Sie richtig. An sich sollen Sie die Krankheit erfahren! Sie sollen nicht Ihrem Bruder misstrauen, nicht Amerika, nicht Rußland und nicht Gott. *Sich selbst müssen Sie misstrauen!*’ (18). Thus, as Ratman argues, Aichinger creates a dynamic between inner and outer turmoil, and sees ‘das zerstörerische Chaos der Außenwelt als genaues Spiegelbild einer zutiefst gestörten Innenwelt.’<sup>564</sup> Furthermore, Aichinger identifies the experience of self-destabilisation as a way of escaping the logic of mistrust, scapegoating and self-exculpation characterising post-war Austria, that is, as a viable strategy for post-war reconstruction: ‘Werden wir mißtrauisch gegen uns selbst, um vertrauenswürdiger zu sein!’ Her testimony and societal critique are played out in a critical approach to language which instead of seeking to define and appropriate, must position itself as a disturbant to hegemonic discourses: ‘Die Sprache muss deshalb in sich schon Engagement sein, weil die benützte Sprache immer etabliert ist, weil sie vergeht, indem sie sich ereignet.’<sup>565</sup> As she notes in ‘Schlechte Wörter’, language is itself complicit with the dynamics of disavowal that she distrusts in Austrian society: ‘Ich weiss, dass die Welt schlechter ist als ihr Name und dass deshalb auch ihr Name schlecht ist.’<sup>566</sup> As opposed to Wolfgang Hildesheimer’s view that ‘[Aichingers Erzählungen] handeln nicht von Fragen an die Welt, denn das Schweigen der Welt is

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<sup>560</sup> *Ibid.*, p.62.

<sup>561</sup> Reichensperger in Moser, p.94.

<sup>562</sup> Ilse Aichinger, ‘Aufruf zum Mißtrauen’ in *Ilse Aichinger: Leben und Werk*, ed. by Samuel Moser (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1995), pp.18-19. Subsequent references in the text.

<sup>563</sup> Annette Ratman, *Spiegelungen. Ein Tanz: Untersuchung zur Prosa und Lyrik Ilse Aichingers* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2001), p.8.

<sup>564</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.

<sup>565</sup> Manuel Esser, ‘Die Vögel beginnen zu singen, wenn es noch finster ist’ in Moser, p.32.

<sup>566</sup> Ilse Aichinger, ‘Schlechte Wörter’ in *Schlechte Wörter* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1987), pp.11-14, p.13.

Voraussetzung des Geschehens,<sup>567</sup> Aichinger's assessment of the notion of difference, exclusion and trauma is played out in a specific post-Anschluss context through the constant interrogation of language.

Her linguistic practice is described by Reichensperger as a 'Suchbewegung' and involves an attempt to understand her own literary origins with reference to the Holocaust.<sup>568</sup> Through distrust, questions, silences, Aichinger evokes situations through concrete objects and figures that engender semantic fields and divergent meanings that react to the political manipulation of language to obscure meaning: 'Der Krieg ist ja eine Möglichkeit, den Tod vor dem Tod zu verstecken, den Tod mit dem Tod zu verdecken. Daß man den Dingen nicht mehr ins Auge schaut, weder dem Leben noch dem Tod.'<sup>569</sup> The figures of her texts, bound men, mice, spots, are the uncanny and incongruous presences that allow a new perspective on language that can accommodate what seemed to be irreconcilable differences and unanswerable paradoxes in the aftermath of persecution and genocide that are the foundational experiences of Aichinger's writing: 'Die Angst kommt von der Verfolgung. Abgesehen davon, dass sie schon ein Urphänomen aller Menschen ist, kommt sie doch in speziellen Fällen von Erlebnissen her, die sich weitergeben. Aus den Ghettos. Man soll die Angst nicht unterbewerten, denn sie bewirkt vieles.'<sup>570</sup>

Aichinger's animals deconstruct human/animal boundaries, underlining the arbitrariness of conceptualising and delimiting the other against the self. Furthermore, in the context of her critique of rational humanism (which I will analyse in relation to her short story 'Der Gefesselte') Aichinger's poetics feature animals, children, and even inanimate objects as disturbances to a rationalist conception of humanity, described by Adorno and Horkheimer as 'the denial of nature, the quintessence of all civilising rationality.'<sup>571</sup> The proliferation of animals in Aichinger's prose metaphorises the possibility of accommodating difference and sharing space (both textually and literally) with others, dramatizing the notion that 'the seemingly endless construction and reconstruction of the boundaries of the Self and Other also

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<sup>567</sup> Wolfgang Hildesheimer, 'Der Querbalken' in *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd.7: *Vermischte Schriften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1991), p.89

<sup>568</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.94

<sup>569</sup> Hermann Vinke, 'Sich nicht anpassen lassen. Gespräch mit Ilse Aichinger über Sophie Scholl', in Moser, p.36. See also, Eva Roiter, "Nachtbilder – Poesie und Musik", ORF 29.10.2011, [oe1.orf.at/programm/287205](http://oe1.orf.at/programm/287205): 'In einem aus sinnfälligen, überaus konkreten und einfachen Dingen geformten Wortschatz - Kohlen, Hölzer, Schnee, Gebirge, Gräser - werden Weltbilder umgestülpt.'

<sup>570</sup> Esser, p.47.

<sup>571</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, 'Odysseus or the Myth of Enlightenment', tr. Robert Huellor-Kentor in *New German Critique* 56:1992, pp.109-141, p.119.

passes by way of an animal idiom.’<sup>572</sup>

‘Die Maus’ (first published in the journal *Akzente* in 1963 before being included in the volume of short stories *Eliza, Eliza*, 1965) is narrated from the perspective of a mouse excluded from a home that other animals are permitted to enter. The mouse observes but does not intervene in the community around her, indicated by the noises of the ‘Nachbarskinder’ (42,44). In this sense, the story echoes with Böll’s understanding of post-war literature as one that rejects the notion of homeliness and neighbourliness, these having become negatively connoted in the aftermath of Nazism and the Second World War:

Nirgendwo wird Nachbarschaft als etwas Dauerhaftes, Vertrauenswerchendes geschildert (Nachbarschaft, Einanderhelfen, Zusammenhalt, Verbündetsein, Verbundenheit – das scheinen nur die Mörder zu kennen) Die Anderen helfen einander nicht, halten nicht zusammen, sind nicht verbündet.<sup>573</sup>

The mouse underlines the arbitrariness of differentiation and exclusion: ‘Und weshalb kann ich es nicht [ins Haus gehen]? Weil die Haustüren geschlossen und die größeren Tiere ums Haus sind, aus solchen und ähnlichen Gründen?’<sup>574</sup> Aichinger’s choice of the mouse is significant as it echoes with the designation of the Third Reich’s ‘undesirables’ as ‘vermin’, which has also impacted upon the testimony and self-image of many survivors of persecution.<sup>575</sup> Furthermore, the mouse is a feminine noun in German, which underlines the paradoxical position of the mouse as both ‘inside’ and outside the home (an irritating presence ‘inside’ which should remain ‘outside’), just as women occupy the position of being both inside and outside the symbolic order.<sup>576</sup> In an interview Aichinger has expressed her determination to write on behalf of the excluded and the weak, which appears in her story ‘die Maus,’ by identifying her best quality as her ‘Identifikation mit den Schwachen, Behinderten, Geschädigten und die Bereitschaft, die sich daraus ergebenden Konsequenzen ernst auf sich zu nehmen.’<sup>577</sup> The story ends with the mouse’s refusal to identify with her own image: ‘es ist

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<sup>572</sup> Sax, p.19.

<sup>573</sup> Heinrich Böll, ‘Frankfurter Vorlesung’ [1964] in *Essayistische Schriften und Reden 2: 1964-1972* (Köln: Kiperheuer & Witsch, 1979), pp.30-88, p.55.

<sup>574</sup> Ilse Aichinger, ‘Die Maus’ in *Eliza, Eliza* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1991), p.41.

<sup>575</sup> Hermann Langbein documents this in his collection of survivor testimonies most of which describe how inmates recognised and explained the process of dehumanisation as animalisation affected them first hand, Hermann Langbein, *Uomini ad Auschwitz* (Milano: Mursia, 1984), p.103,106,113. Art Spiegelmann’s *Maus* also adopts this animal metaphor to underscore and subvert the effect of Nazi rhetoric.

<sup>576</sup> See Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p.165: ‘The feminine is at once constructed within the symbolic order, like any gender, and yet is relegated to its margins [...] The woman is both “inside” and “outside” male society.’

<sup>577</sup> Ilse Aichinger, ‘Fragebogen’, *FAZ* 3.12.1993.

nicht zu glauben, wieviel eingebrochene Brücken es gibt und immer noch genügend Möglichkeiten, anders übers Eis zu kommen [...] ich will keinen Spiegel, keine Glasscheibe und nicht einmal eine finstere Handvoll Wasser, die mir mein Bild zurückwirft. Wer weiß, vielleicht besteht mein Jubel darin, dass ich unauffindbar bin.<sup>578</sup> As opposed to Levinas, who recognises in the face the ultimate ethical imperative, Aichinger refuses to reveal the face of the mouse by refusing description or analogy.

The talking animal is a trope of the fantastic and its uncanny vocalisation of human concerns such as exclusion and isolation subvert the supposed hierarchy between man and animal, and thus, Aichinger's deployment of the fantastic in her highly metaphorical language indicates what Jackson has called the fantastic's capacity for

the radical refusal of the structures, the 'syntax' of the cultural order. Incoherent, fluid selves exist in opposition to precious portraits of individuals as whole or essential. They break the boundaries separating self from other, leaving structures dissolved, or ruptured through a radical open-endedness of being.<sup>579</sup>

By presenting us with a talking mouse able to reflect on her position outside the social order but yet able to comment on its inherent contradictions, Aichinger avoids categorising her subjects into biological, animal life (*zoë*), and human life (*bios*), which according to Arendt 'is always full of events that can immediately be told as a story.'<sup>580</sup> Whereas the title of the story refers to the type of categorisation that operates the human/animal distinction, Aichinger's mouse inflects human preoccupations with difference, inferiority and exclusion from an irreconcilably separate subject position, problematizing the notion of the mouse as a disturbing vermin.

The mouse's monologue features images of melting ice, broken bridges and incomprehensible songs symbolising failed communication and isolation, emphasised by the mouse's unanswered subversive questions: 'Wie wäre es aber, wenn ich versuchen wollte, hier heraus zu kommen, wenn ich auch nur einen Schritt nach einer Richtung täte? Alles veränderte sich' (43). Aichinger is writing to jolt the reader, and not provide solutions for change, but provoke 'ein Aufruf zum Mißtrauen'; as Neumann states, 'Wer Ilse Aichinger liest, muss sich aber dran gewöhnen, dass es angemessene Antworten nicht geben. Jede wäre die falsche, sie

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<sup>578</sup> *Ibid.* p.44. See also Max Frisch's diary entry: 'Du sollst dich kein Bildnis machen, es heißt, von Gott. Es dürfte auch in diesem Sinn gelten: Gott als lebendige in jedem Menschen, das was nicht erfassbar ist. Es ist eine Versündigung, die wir so wie sie an uns begangen wird, fast ohne unterlass wieder begehen' in Max Frisch, *Tagebuch 1946-1949* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985), pp.27-32, p.32.

<sup>579</sup> Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy* (London: Routledge, 1981), p.50.

<sup>580</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958), p.97.

wäre das Ende des Fragens, ein Falsches Zur-Ruhe Kommen.<sup>581</sup> The author defers answers through further questioning, provides a space for the reader to deconstruct and become suspicious of her understanding of the world as it is. Hybridity, symbolised by the talking, thinking mouse shows difference as providing new opportunities for openness and communication. Embodiment and belonging should always be questioned for the sake of communication and preservation of the other, as Aichinger has said elsewhere, ‘die Fremdsten sind die, die sich am meisten zu Hause fühlen.’<sup>582</sup>

Whereas *Quaestio de Centauris* maintains the necessity of upholding the human/animal boundary for the sake of safeguarding human communities, ‘Die Maus’ critiques the discrimination and binary oppositions on which communities are founded, showing the relativity of species hierarchies and a common vulnerability to arbitrary exclusion. ‘Die Maus’ disturbs the binarisms same/difference, belonging/non-belonging by expressing the subversive potential of hybridity. Yet, despite the mouse’s lack of categorizable identity, she does emphasise that her exclusion from the community of house-dwellers undermines her power to act which she sees as positive, such is her suspicion of any manifestation of power:

Ich kontrolliere nichts, ich bin zugegen. Das ist auch ein Vorteil meiner Lage. Alle andern kommen leicht in den Verdacht, sie möchten etwas kontrollieren, in die Hand bekommen, sich über etwas setzen. Aber ich nicht. (42-3)

The mouse refuses to see any image of herself, and prefers to remain ‘unauffindbar’, not invisible, rather by maintaining a fluid and non-defined identity, she cannot be related to in terms of difference or sameness, which undermines the possibility to exclude and dominate. As Sibona argues ‘la transgression et l’hybridité entrent en jeu pour mener la reflexion sur cette limite où la pensée rationnelle de domination doit admettre son incompetence et accepter une opacité inhérente à la domination de l’autre.’<sup>583</sup> Aichinger’s uncanny speaking mouse refuses to be identified and therefore categorised; however, the title of the story reveals the inevitability of such conceptual limitations and her open-ended questions disturb rather than resolve. Thus, like Wittig writing in *Die Kreatur* about ‘die neue Macht, durch die wir der Erde mächtig werden sollen, stark genug sein wird, dann wird die Kreatur erlöst sein von der physischen Kausalität, in die wir unsere Gewaltätigkeit eingebaut haben’, she defers the possibility of

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<sup>581</sup> Peter Horst Neumann, ‘Größere Hoffnung und grüner Esel’, *Die Zeit*, 1.11.1991.

<sup>582</sup> Aichinger, *Die größere Hoffnung*, p.12. Erich Fried, Aichinger’s husband writes a letter on the theme of ‘sich nicht gewöhnen’ echoing the notion of distrust and unhomeliness as ethical, alert insight: ‘Denn wenn ich mich gewöhne /Verrate ich/Die die sich nicht gewöhnen/Denn wenn ich mich gewöhne/Morde ich.’ Erich Fried, *Die Muse hat Kanten* (Wien: Klaus Wagenbach, 1995), p.71.

<sup>583</sup> Bruno Sibona, ‘homus porosus: sur la porosité de l’animal configurateur de monde’ in *Notre animal intérieur et les theories de la créativité*, ed. by Lucile Desblache (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2009), pp.9-34, p.21.

communication across species lines to a remote future (a path across the ice in ‘Die Maus’) in which an openness to the ‘creature’ may be possible.<sup>584</sup>

Yet, in the story ‘Der Gefesselte’ the positive emancipation from the power relations of the social order experienced by the embodied hybridity of the mouse become a more shattering and traumatising experience of stigmatisation through embodied difference, as the next section will explore.

### **Creaturely Life and the experience of violence, shame and exclusion**

‘Der Gefesselte’ teases out the ‘creaturely’ dimension of the human being exposed to the metamorphic power of violence and exclusion and underlines the traumatic dimension of creaturely exposure. Aichinger’s narrative of post-traumatic embodiment ‘Der Gefesselte’, written in 1951 and published in a collection of short stories written between 1948 and 1952 of the same name, is a parabolic exploration of the embodied processes of identity formation in the aftermath of a physical and psychical disturbance. In an echo of Levi’s exploration of ‘vizi di forma’ (formal aberrations), Aichinger has stated that her stories privilege the old, the weak and the ‘etwas Mißglückten’: ‘ich verbinde mit ihnen dieses Ausgeliefertsein, dieses Nicht-Stimmen. [...] Irgendetwas is da daneben geraten.’<sup>585</sup> As I will show, the story depicts the physical outcome of an act of violence which leads to the bound man’s adaptation to his new embodiment. His physical change as a result of a life-changing act of violence is both an experience of victimhood, survival and adaptation, and thus despite Aichinger’s claim to support those who are ‘hard done by’ (*danebengeraten*) in the above interview, ‘Der Gefesselte’ problematizes the call to compassion of creatureliness as a result of the vulnerability and exposure to the violence of an unnamed and therefore unaccused other. My analysis of the story will trace Aichinger’s portrayal of traumatic creaturely embodiment which contains within it a challenge to the automatic link between vulnerability and victimhood by drawing on Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of the post-war rationalist conception of humanism through the metaphor of the rope as well as Camus’ notion of existentialist freedom within the restrictions of embodied vulnerability.

In ‘Der Gefesselte’, a man wakes up in a wood, and notices that he has been tied up: ‘‘Er erwachte in der Sonne [...] Als er [die Fliegen] verscheuchen wollte, bemerkte er, daß er

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<sup>584</sup> See p. 29 of this thesis.

<sup>585</sup> Esser, p.47.



gefesselt war' (12). He has a headache and has been bleeding as a result of an attack: 'Er befeuchtete seine Lippen und schmeckte Blut' (12). Thus, the story starts immediately after a moment of violence, the only evidence of which are the blood on the bound man's lips and the ropes with which he is now bound. Stories in the collection *Der Gefesselte* are mostly concerned with changes of state, of metamorphoses and mercurial embodiment, much like Levi's in *Storie Naturali*. As we see in 'der Gefesselte' and 'Spiegelgeschichte' these changes are often caused by violent interventions on the body and its integrity: in 'Spiegelgeschichte' a woman dies of a botched abortion, in 'der Gefesselte', a man is tied up and forced to reckon with his new embodiment. 'Spiegelgeschichte' (told in both linear and reverse fashion – the woman both dies and is born at the end of the text) portrays the moment of birth as one of intense sensation: 'Es ist der Tag deiner Geburt. Du kommst zur Welt und schlägst die Augen auf und schließt sie wieder vor dem starken Licht. Das Licht wärmt dir die Glieder, du regst dich in der Sonne, du bist da, du lebst' (74). At first, the sun's glare forces the bound man to close his eyes again in 'Der Gefesselte', 'Ihr Licht fiel auf sein Gesicht, so dass er die Augen wieder schließen musste' (12). States of physical and ontological flux are often represented in terms of their embodied effects rather than their cognitive impact in Aichinger's work. As Reichensperger notes, perception is a fundamental function of Aichinger's prose, namely 'die Schärfung der Wahrnehmung durch das Prisma der Sprache ... das aufbrechen erstarrte, eingengter Alltagswelt.'<sup>586</sup> The narrator emphasises the discomfort of his eyes in the sun, and the taste of blood noting the embodied impact of the extra-diegetic violent episode. Furthermore, there are practically no temporal transitions in the story, displaying the suturing function of perception and sensory impressions such as light, heat and strength.

Similarly, Aichinger had explored the connections between embodiment and violence in the chapter 'Der Tod der Großmutter' in *Die größere Hoffnung* to denote the body's vulnerability to transformation. The chapter culminates in the Grandmother's suicide to avoid deportation in the night, which is presented as an ominous ally of the violent persecutors. The night is depicted as a material, embodied being – '[sie] warf ihre Dunkelheit aus und fing die Fremde ein' (45) – which paradoxically exposes (rather than conceals, another instance of Aichinger's mistrust of common poetic tropes) human beings at moments of transition, when they are at their most vulnerable:

Die Nacht sprang vom Himmel und sie entdeckte die Erbarmungswürdigkeit der Welt [...]. Sie entdeckte die Neugeborenen, Verzweiflung in den winzigen, gefalteten

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<sup>586</sup> Reichensperger, p.90.

Gesichtern, Angst vor der Verkörperung, Schmerz um den verlorenen Glanz. Und sie entdeckte die Sterbenden in der Trauer um den Verlust des Körperlichen, in der Angst vor dem kommenden Glanz.

Thus, by depicting bodies in precarious states of flux, Aichinger emphasises perception to denote the embodied nature of violence and the resulting sense of vulnerability and exposure – ‘Ausgeliefertsein’.

Like a newborn adjusting to its new body, the man in ‘Der Gefesselte’ experiments and adapts to his ropes: ‘Sobald [die Schnur] spannte, gab er nach und versuchte es mit größerer Vorsicht wieder ... Er legte den Kopf auf den Rasen zurück, rollte sich herum und kam auf die Knie’ (13). Told from his perspective, he imagines himself as a ‘Säugling’, cementing the loss of his former identity. These existential and physical losses frame the story which traces two losses between which the bound man undergoes a renewed identity formation: the first ‘Fesselung’ is a loss of his former social existence (‘Es fehlte außer dem Messer auch noch das wenig Geld, das er bei sich gehabt hatte, und sein Rock’, 12)<sup>587</sup>, and a second loss when he is released from his bonds, provoking another disturbance of identity. The body’s integrity is disturbed due to his attack, which mirrors a disturbance in the psychic life of the subject, indicating the intimacy of subjectivity, embodiment and physical traumas.

The ropes are the only permanent remainder of the violent episode which symbolises the break with the past as well as the disturbance of embodiment and identity. The man is unable to say how his new physical condition came about; the narrator notes ‘die stöckenden Erzählungen des Gefesselten, seine Art abubrechen, wenn die Rede auf den Überfall kam’ (16). His linguistic disturbance is a typical characteristic of traumatic witnessing, in which the traumatic event is recast within the body as sensation that cannot be articulated linguistically. As Judith Herman affirms in *Trauma and Recovery*: ‘Traumatic narratives lack verbal narrative and context rather they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images.’<sup>588</sup> This understanding of trauma demonstrates how the subject’s narrative becomes fragmented when the body becomes a primary signifier of experience. As Elaine Scarry in her illuminating study *The Body in Pain* notes: ‘Physical pain has no voice, but when it at last finds a voice, it begins to tell a story, and the story it begins to tell is about the inseparability of these three subjects [pain, voice and story – AH], their embeddedness in one another.’<sup>589</sup> The bound man’s physical

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<sup>587</sup> I will return to the significance of these two details of the man’s previous life.

<sup>588</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), p.239.

<sup>589</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.3.

pain told from his perspective ('Er muss einen Schlag auf den Kopf bekommen haben' 13) is the condition for story-telling which is at the same time a confrontation with an embodied that has become uncomfortable. For Thums, Aichinger's prose articulates a search for origins, both poetological and historical: '[Ihre Prosa] ist ein aporetisches Schreiben der Präsenz, das sich der Distanz zu seinem eigenen Ursprung bewusst ist.'<sup>590</sup> In 'Die Maus' as in 'Der Gefesselte', physical differentiation and exclusion are the defining dynamics of Aichinger's subject. Thus, the ropes catalyse both the narrative and the bound man's new embodiment: they act as a remainder and a reminder of the violence that undid the bound man's former life and became the foundational trauma of the man's existence, evoking a generation marked by the Second World War. Indeed, the man begins to perform tricks when he is hired by a circus owner whom he delights with his animal-like movements: 'Auch nicht die Sprünge der jüngsten Panther hatten ihn je in ein solches Entzücken versetzt' (11). The circus is a privileged trope in post-war literature, as Fiedler argues in his seminal work *Freaks*. He affirms that 75 million Americans attended freak shows every year throughout the 1960s; having lived through the horrors of the Second World War, Fiedler assumed optimistically that these spectators would be, 'the last generations whose imagination would be shaped by a live confrontation with the nightmare distortions of the human body.'<sup>591</sup>

Thus, the bonds are instrumental to the bound man's self-expression as his new identity stems from them; they are, to quote Žižek, the 'non-symbolisable kernel around which all later successive symbolisations whirled.'<sup>592</sup> As Žižek maintains, the foundational trauma of the emergence of subjectivity constantly echoes in the signifying processes (here the bound man's ropes with which he performs his tricks): 'it is through its repetition, through its echoes within the signifying structure that the cause [of trauma] retroactively becomes what it always already was.'<sup>593</sup> In 'Der Gefesselte', the story of the bound man's attack cannot be signified other than through his ropes. Being tied up, his body contorts, showing his vulnerability to external pressures on the one hand but highlights how he engenders a new existence within the parameters of trauma and violence, as psychotherapist Susie Orbach argues 'The somatic self or body self finds itself through crises that have to be managed and survived.'<sup>594</sup> The ropes symbolise how a traumatic moment suffuses and surrounds the body and replace the man's

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<sup>590</sup> Thums, p.19.

<sup>591</sup> Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks* (London: Simon&Schuster, 1978), p.257,16.

<sup>592</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality* (London: Verso, 2005), p.34.

<sup>593</sup> *Ibid.*, p.32.

<sup>594</sup> Cited by Maggie Turp, *Hidden Self Harm* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2003), p.92.

ability to articulate his experience, they are what Dominick LaCapra has called a ‘traumatropism’ to define the *Entstellung* of psychic scarring onto the body ‘a particular growth or curvature of an organism (esp. A plant) resulting from a wound.’<sup>595</sup>

As a result of his attack his body becomes similar to that of an animal. When he first stands up as a bound man, he feels like a four-legged creature: ‘Der Gefesselte richtete sich auf. Seine eigene Überraschung war immer wieder die eines Vierfüßigen, der sich erhebt’ (16). He is solely referred to as ‘er’ or ‘der Gefesselte’ (he only becomes ‘der Mann’ when his ropes are untied), and thus escapes a unilaterally human definition. When he fights a wolf in the forest, he is described in animal terms: ‘seine Freiheit in diesem Kampf war, jede Beugung seiner Glieder der Fessel anzugleichen, die Freiheit der Panther, der Wölfe, und der wilden Blüten, die im Abendwind schwinken.’ (25) Furthermore, the man recognises the human in the animal and vice versa. In his encounter with the wild wolf, he expresses ‘Zärtlichkeit für den Ebenbürtigen, für den Aufrechten in dem Geduckten’ (24). This may highlight the contingency of upholding differences according to arbitrary categories such as animal/human, same/other. The persecution of perceived ‘Untermenschen’ in the name of the Reich’s racial purity sought to eliminate those who manifested, not difference altogether, but the wrong kinds of differences, what René Girard calls ‘la différence hors système.’<sup>596</sup> In her 2001 autobiographical text, *Film und Verhängnis*, Aichinger critiques the contingency of differences in shifting political contexts after the war: ‘Jetzt war ‘der Jude’ keine Gefahr mehr, jetzt war ‘der Russe’ Inbegriff der Bedrohung.’<sup>597</sup>

Thus, the man’s liminality undermines a radical human/animal difference which Chris Danta describes as the prototype of ‘the social fantasies’ legibility that create and sustain a collective “we” in the name of whom violence is exercised.’<sup>598</sup> The act of violence that defines the ‘Gefesselte’’s identity forces him a mode of being between animal and human which can be described as ‘creaturely’ in senses cited in the OED definition, namely that the creature can be ‘animal or human’ and that the creature invites a particular kind of affective response, based on its behaviour and appearance.

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<sup>595</sup> Dominick LaCapra uses the word ‘traumatropism’ to define posttraumatic embodiment as a result of experience and identification with the Second World War in *History and its Limits* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2009). He cites the OED definition, p.59.

<sup>596</sup> René Girard, *Le Bouc Émissaire* (Paris: Grasset, 1982), p.35.

<sup>597</sup> Ilse Aichinger, *Film und Verhängnis* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2001), p.60.

<sup>598</sup> Chris Danta and Stephen Vardoulakis, ‘Foreword’ in *SubStance: The Political Animal* (2008), Vol 37: 3, No.117, pp.1-7, p.4.

Santner's analysis of 'creaturely life' argues that creaturely life is embodied within a network of interpersonal, social, political and spatial relations, the creature, who has 'a kind of life in excess both of our merely biological life and of our life in the space of meaning.'<sup>599</sup> According to Santner, creaturely existence, between man and animal, is 'an index of a traumatic kernel around which the "ego life" of the other has, at some level, been (dis)organised.'<sup>600</sup> Creaturely experience is the traumatic, embodied aftermath of traumatic events, and hinges on biopolitical exposure: 'The essential 'disruption' that renders man 'creaturely' has a distinctly political – or better *biopolitical* – aspect; it names the threshold where life becomes a matter of politics and politics comes to inform the very matter and materiality of life.'<sup>601</sup> Thus, for Santner, creatureliness signifies 'a kind of exposure that distinguishes human beings from other kinds of life' a symptom of traumatizing entrapment in intersubjective power relations that moulds man's physicality (his *zoë* – his biological life – as well as his *bios* – his life in society); thus, the creature is created through dynamics of violence and exposure, thereby subjected to the other.<sup>602</sup> The bound man affirms his own sense of exposure: 'der Gedanke, dass er nicht in der Lage war, sich zu verteidigen, erschreckte ihn' (14). Thus, an uncanny and discomfiting creatureliness appears in 'Der Gefesselte' where the boundary between man and animal becomes blurred as a result of a traumatic disturbance of the subject. Girard sees the fear of de-differentiation of the animal/human as a characteristic of great social crises causing moments of intensified persecution of victims, linking the plight of the 'Gefesselte' to Aichinger's defence of the victims, 'die daneben geraten sind': 'les grandes crises sociales qui favorisent les persecutions collectives se vivent comme une experience d'indifférentiation.'<sup>603</sup>

'Der Gefesselte' adapts in an animalistic way to his new physique under the watchful eye of the 'Tierbändiger', the animal tamer, whose etymological link to the word 'das Band' – the rope, the tie - is significant. 'Der Tierbändiger' incorporates 'bändigen' meaning to harness and the noun 'Das Band', the bond, the ribbon, the shackles, as well as being the German word for ligament. This suggests that the bound man is in fact triply bound: (1) he is bound by the ropes of his unidentified attackers, (2) he is owned and harnessed by the animal tamer 'Der Tierbändiger', for whom he performs stunts at the circus to the delight of the audience, (3) the link between bond and ligament suggests that his external bonds mirror and complement the

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<sup>599</sup> Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006), p.34. By 'space of meaning' I understand the network of social, political, spatial and civic relations that make up the self.

<sup>600</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xii.

<sup>601</sup> *Ibid.*, p.12.

<sup>602</sup> Eric L. Santner, *The King's Two Bodies* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012), p.6.

<sup>603</sup> Girard, 1982, p.47.

inner lattice-work of his ligaments, the inner and outer modes of binding. In Julia Lupton's words, 'the creature is permanently undergoing a process of creation, subject to transformations at the behest of an Other'.<sup>604</sup> Creaturely life is therefore inherently dynamic, always shape-shifting according to the demands and pressures (which Santner will call "cringes") exerted upon it by sovereign violence, that is, the biopolitical forces that continually shape the physical form of individuals *captivated* (in Heidegger's sense of *Benommenheit*, dazzled 'thrownness', subjection or exposure) within a dynamic biopolitical and existential forcefield (for Heidegger's discussion of the animal's captivation [*Benommenheit*] which underlies the traumatic dimension of Dasein, see Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1972), p.344). According to Santner, creatureliness is not 'so much the name of a determinate state of being as the signifier of an *ongoing exposure*, of being caught up in the process of *becoming creature*'.<sup>605</sup>

With his limited movement, social marginality and affinity to animals, the bound man is aware of his potential exclusion and discrimination. Hence, the story dramatizes the link between shame and victimhood as foundational processes of subject formation following Copjec's theory of shame. The ropes act as a traumatic remainder of a moment of humiliating physical violence. Whereas his physicality is animalised through violence, his shame at his bodily exposure firmly anchors him in the social, underscoring his liminality further. When the animal tamer asks whether he has made the story up, he responds 'er hätte auch diese [Geschichte] nicht erfunden. Und dabei stieg ihm das Blut im Gesicht. Er blieb lieber im Schatten' (11). This body language suggests that he is lying or that he is embarrassed about his passivity in the attack. When he wakes up, he expects that people are watching him, waiting to mock him: 'Beim Krachen eines Zweiges hielt er inne. Irgend jemand in diesem Umkreis hielt nur mit Mühe sein Gelächter zurück' (14). As Joan Copjec confirms, a subject's self-awareness passes through the experience of shame, 'the sense of the presence of others as such, emerges not in a moment of cognition ("I know that others exist"), but in a feeling of shame that suffuses the body of the observer. [...] Consciousness is shamed by an abrupt reminder that it is after all tethered to a bodily vulnerability'.<sup>606</sup> Indeed, the bound man expects laughter to break out at any minute 'Er erwartete, das lange unterdrückte Gelächter jetzt hervorbrechen zu hören, aber alles blieb still' (8). In Copjec's terms, shame is a painfully 'isolating experience and at once a

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<sup>604</sup> Cited by Santner 2006, p.28.

<sup>605</sup> *Ibid.*, p.28.

<sup>606</sup> Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's No Other Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), p.213.

basic social response.’<sup>607</sup> She notes that the expectations of the Other and the shame they engender are the beginnings of subjectivity: “I am not ashamed *of* myself, I *am* the shame I feel: shame is there in the place of the object”<sup>608</sup> Subjectivity only comes into being through a feeling of shame that suffuses the inscriptions of the political and the social like the creaturely body, made all the more vulnerable by the debasing, animalising experience of shame. Furthermore, his blush could be correlated with Agamben’s discussion of Antelme’s depiction of a man’s blush on the death march from Auschwitz: ‘It is hard to forget the flush of the student of Bologna, who died during the march alone at the last minute [...] And certainly the intimacy that one experiences before one’s unknown murderer is the most extreme intimacy, an intimacy that as such can provoke shame.’<sup>609</sup> As such, Agamben suggests that the blush is a ‘*new ethical material*’, which ‘like a mute apostrophe flying through time to reach us’ bears witness to a crime committed against a fellow human being.<sup>610</sup> Ruth Leys in her commentary on the passage, notes that the blush is a manifestation of ‘threatened aliveness or vitality’, which like the experience of vulnerability, arouses shame in the man’s very materiality, singling him out as one marked out for violence.<sup>611</sup> As a wounded, animal-like, history-less outsider, the bound man embodies what Andrew Benjamin has called ‘the threat of particularity,’ as opposed to the human community in which he lives.<sup>612</sup> In *Der Gefesselte*, the other performers constantly try to cut his ropes, suggesting the intolerability of his physical difference:

An diesem Abend packten ihn zwei von den Zirkusleuten plötzlich an Armen und Beinen und kamen mit ihm ganz nahe ans Feuer, sie schwenkten ihn hin und her, während drüben zwei andere wie zum Scherz die Arme ausbreiteten. Dann warfen sie ihn hinüber, aber sie warfen zu kurz. Die beiden anderen wichen zurück – wie sie später sagten, um den Anprall besser zu ertragen (19).

The circus owner exploits the bound man’s helplessness to arouse pity in the other performers and draw crowds to see him perform: ‘Der Zirkusbesitzer wußte, dass die Hilflosigkeit des Gefesselten ihn zur Not vor dem Neid seiner Leute bewahrte’ (18). The attitude of the other performers and spectators veers between pity, mockery and disgust for his condition; the shift of narrative perspective reveals the uncanniness he evokes: ‘mit diesem Lächeln, von dem man nie wusste ob es nicht das Feuer allein auf sein Gesicht warf’ (19). The

<sup>607</sup> Joan Copjec, ‘The Object Gaze: Shame, Hejab, Cinema’, *Filosofi Vestnik* XXVII (2), pp.161-183, p.166.

<sup>608</sup> *Ibid.*, p.168.

<sup>609</sup> Agamben, 1999, pp.103-4.

<sup>610</sup> *Ibid.*, p.104.

<sup>611</sup> Ruth Leys, *From Guilt to Shame*, p.178.

<sup>612</sup> Andrew Benjamin, *Of Jews and Animals* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p.5.

bound man represents a threat to the integrity of the community by usurping the performers' position and seducing the owner's wife (she is accused of sleeping with him when the bound man is disgraced 'wie nimmt er dich in die Arme?', 27) and harks back to another subversive bound figure, that of the creature Odradek in Kafka's *Die Sorge des Hausvaters*. Odradek is made from a mix of inorganic materials, thread being one of them, and is described as 'das Ganze erscheint zwar sinnlos aber in seiner Art abgeschlossen' who is 'außerordentlich beweglich und nicht zu fangen.'<sup>613</sup> The looseness of Odradek's thread reveals how the symbolic order is unravelled by his presence, which disturbs the progeny of the 'Hausvater.' The uncanny, bound figure is a cipher for the disturbance in and of a community and integrity of communities as we see in the intertextual reading of Kafka and Aichinger. The creaturely outsider both threatens the integrity of the community and unites the community against him. With the exception of the wolf, the circus owner and his wife, he is always presented as a particular individual excluded from collectives such as 'die Zirkusleute,' 'die Kinder,' 'die Zuschauer,' and die 'Spaßmacher'. In his structural analysis of myths about persecution and scapegoating, Girard notes that 'l'ordre absent ou compromis par le bouc émissaire se rétablit ou s'établit par l'entremise de celui qui l'a d'abord troublé.'<sup>614</sup> The man's exceptional status and his blurring of species and social lines marks him out as different, as scapegoat, and therefore as victim.

Thus, the uncanniness of the bound man's physicality reveals the slipperiness of his mode of embodiment which provokes a mixture of pity and disgust, dependant on the gendered point of view of the observer. For Martha Nussbaum in her study of the inter-relationship of shame and disgust, disgust is provoked by the sense of a breakdown of the boundaries that separate the human from the animal – 'one sure way of putting a group down is to cause it to occupy a status between the fully human and the merely animal' – in 'Der Gefesselte', the male members of the circus community reflect this pattern of behaviour.<sup>615</sup> As the narrative shows, the male circus performers are unsettled by his difference, and the circus owner places him under surveillance to make sure he does not cut his ropes in the rare moments where he feels discomfort: 'Man mußte dafür sorgen, dass er in solchen Augenblicken kein Messer bei sich hatte' (20). However, the circus owner's wife is a privileged interlocutor of the bound man and has a more complex attitude to his condition. On the one hand, she sympathises with his

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<sup>613</sup> Kafka, p.139.

<sup>614</sup> Girard, p.64.

<sup>615</sup> Martha Nussbaum *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame and the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p.110.



discomfort. One night, she watches him sleep and observes the lacerations of his skin and clothes due to the rope which shows no signs of fraying, which provokes her to beg him to free himself, for the sake of his well-being: ‘Am nächsten Morgen bat sie ihn noch dringender, die Fessel abzunehmen’ (23). On the other, her relationship with the bound man is only permissible because of his monstrosity. Without the ropes, she would be suspected of having an affair with him, but the ropes, underscoring his difference and sexual undesirability, would prevent this: ‘Wenn sie abgenommen war, [würde] sie nie mehr, ohne bei den anderen Verdacht zu erwecken, neben ihm auf den Steinen am Fluß sitzen können’ (22). Yet, she does untie him in the end, as she assumes that he will not really be able to defeat the wolf in the second fight, and therefore that his ropes are not the real source of his power. She liberates him because she presumes him to be weak and uncomfortable, equating his physical difference with vulnerability and the demand for compassion. The woman frees the man during his encounter with a second wolf; she assumes that he did not really kill the first wolf in the forest, and liberates him out of a fear for his vulnerability. Yet, despite his physical difference and exclusion, he did actually kill the first wolf with his bare hands; the reader is therefore alerted to the dangers of associating physical difference and bodily vulnerability with victimhood and passivity.

Santner’s view of the dehumanising and destabilising effects of trauma run the risk of sublimating the effects of violence and fatalising the passivity of victims in what he calls their ‘stuckness’ in trauma, as Dominick LaCapra has warned, ‘the sacralisation of trauma ... may be interwoven with its figuration as sublime [...] unrepresentable, awesome and ultimately elevating.’<sup>616</sup> He follows by suggesting that ‘analyses that stress the role of identity politics or the dubious use of trauma and victim status as symbolic capital are at times warranted.’<sup>617</sup> As I see it, Aichinger’s ‘Der Gefesselte’ is such an analysis of the problem of victimhood and suffering. So, it is important to go beyond the notion of entrapment in trauma that Santner’s analysis emphasizes, without resorting to the idea that ‘creatureliness’ – both the reason for man’s redemption and the cause of violence underlying redemption’s infinite deferral, for the writers of *Die Kreatur* – cements man’s lack of control in his own destiny. Aichinger’s engagement with existentialism and enlightenment rationalism may break a path through the paradox of creaturely stuckness in traumatic animal-like embodiment.

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<sup>616</sup> For the creature’s ‘stuckness’ in traumatic agitation, see Santner, 2006, p.81,88,148; LaCapra, 2009, p.53.

<sup>617</sup> *Ibid.*, p.80.

## Repressing and rationalising the ‘all-too-human’ bound man

For Aichinger, biological adaptation can only lead to violent exclusion which translates into the dominant notion of progress in the name of species adaptation and survival: ‘Man begreift dabei, daß die ganze Biologie eine terroristische Überlebensstrategie ist, der man eigentlich gar nicht gewachsen sein möchte.’<sup>618</sup> The animal-like adaptations of the bound man to his transformation could also be included among these violent strategies in the name of human progress, embodying the competition against nature that enable man’s technological and rational dominance to prevail.<sup>619</sup>

Thus, it would equally be possible to counter the ‘bound man as victim’ narrative with an interrogation of his potential guilt. Firstly, the circumstances of his binding and awakening remain mysterious, due to the ominous presence of the knife. Whilst this is a small detail, it is dubious as to why he would be carrying a knife at all, begging the question: what did he do in order for his captors to tie him up? Furthermore, the use of the verb ‘greifen’ in ‘Er griff nach seinem Messer, aber wieder schnitt die Schnur sanft in sein Fleisch’ (12) opposes the man’s brash, aggressive gesture towards his weapon to the gentle restraining action of the ropes; this may imply that the ropes have a punitive, corrective function, taming his aggression. Furthermore, while he is always free to cut his own ropes, he refuses to, and chooses to stay bound, which could reflect his guilt as to his past actions, which he cannot recount. This may not be caused by the interruptive trauma of being bound, but rather by the guilt causing him to repress the actions that led to his bondage. According to Ruth Leys, guilt feelings may be induced by ‘the unconscious imitation of, or identification with the aggressor’; the bound man may condone his punishment.<sup>620</sup> Furthermore, the bound man actively profits from his bondage which gives him new validation through the admiration of the spectators, countering Santner’s idea that the excessive energy caused by the traumatic incident is a redundant and pathological ‘excess vitality that cannot be put to work.’<sup>621</sup> After the rumours of him killing the wolf spread, he becomes a bad omen of a general crisis: ‘Wäre er einer von ihnen, würde er es selbst nicht glauben. Er dachte, dass sie das Recht hätten, erbittert zu sein: ein Zirkus *um diese Zeit*, ein

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<sup>618</sup>Iris Radisch, Interview with Ilse Aichinger, ‘Ilse Aichinger wird 75’, *Die Zeit*, 01.11.1996.

<sup>619</sup>For Levi the universe is also conditioned by the fight for survival at a biological level, but this should not impact upon man’s moral criteria. Evolution is defined as “la gigantesca sanguinaria competizione che è nata con la prima cellula, che tuttora si svolge intorno a noi sta al di fuori, o al di sotto dei nostri criteri di comportamento”/ ‘the enormous bloody competition that was born with the first cell, and that is still going on around us beneath our own criteria of behaviour’, Primo Levi, *La ricerca delle radici* (Torino: Einaudi, 1995), p.47.

<sup>620</sup>Ruth Leys, *From Guilt to Shame* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p.5.

<sup>621</sup>E.L. Santner, *The Neighbour: Three Inquiries into Political Theology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), p.95.

Gefesselter, ein entkommener Wolf, und jetzt dieses Ende' (26, emph. mine). His tricks ('Sprünge') fascinate the audience, but after the man's defeat of the wolf, the audience's attitude towards him changes: 'was den Sommer über so süß gerochen hatte, schmeckte faul' (27). As a victim, he is fascinating, as an agent, he is repulsive and dangerous.

The repressive function of ropes echoes Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of the figure of Odysseus in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1947), where the image of binding signals the formation of subjectivity through the repression and domination of nature.<sup>622</sup> In the writers' analysis, Odysseus is the prototype of the bourgeois rational subject who orders his men to tie him to his ship's mast as they sail past the sirens. He does not stop his ears, unlike his crew, and they ignore his pleas to be untied when he hears the seductive song of the sirens. Odysseus concedes the archaic power of the song (representing the 'old demons' of nature for Adorno and Horkheimer) by having himself bound, but refuses to stop his ears, thereby increasing his knowledge of the force of nature embodied by the sirens and their song, but not succumbing to it through his own cunning. As the authors of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* conclude: 'the knowledge in which his identity persists and which enables him to survive draws its experience from the multifarious, the diverting and the disintegrating. [...] Odysseus loses himself in order to find himself; the estrangement from nature that he undertakes is completed in his self-abandonment to nature on which he measures himself in every adventure.'<sup>623</sup> In 'Der Gefesselte', the bound man repeats a battle with a wolf twice, and both scenarios have the same outcome: the killing of the wild animal. The first battle occurs when the man is bound enabling the man to conquer the animal; his delight at this conquest is apparent: 'Wie in einem leichten Rausch fühlte er, dass er die tödliche Überlegenheit der freien Glieder verloren hatte, die Menschen unterliegen lässt' (25). The 'deadly superiority of free limbs' implies that man can only dominate animals by through the corrective, taming function of the ropes.

The image of the 'bond' as a corrective and cohesive motif recurs in Michael Haneke's film *Das weiße Band* (2009).<sup>624</sup> The film is set in a rural North German community at the beginning of 1914 and begins with a shot of an expansive landscape over which an invisible narrator states that he feels the need to retell the bizarre happenings in the community of Eichwald because they may be able to give insight ('ein erhellendes Licht') into 'manche

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<sup>622</sup> I wish to thank Prof Jürgen Egyptian for suggesting I compare the bound man with the figure of Odysseus.

<sup>623</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, 'Odysseus or the Myth of Enlightenment', tr. Robert Huellor-Kentor in *New German Critique* 56:1992, pp.109-141, pp.113-114.

<sup>624</sup> Michael Haneke, *Das weiße Band* (DVD: Artificial Eye, 2010).

Vorgänge in diesem Land,’ suggesting the relevance of this film beyond its particular date and context. In one scene, after the sinister children in the film return late for dinner, they are corporeally punished by their parents who then tie a white ribbon to their clothes or hair, supposedly remind them of their innocence, but re-evokes the consequences of their guilt, namely punishment and corporeal constriction and therefore enforcing the hierarchal, patriarchal order which predominates the village and the rest of society. Elfriede Jelinek considers that Haneke’s films show ‘die Verbindungen und Verfesselungen der Personen aneinander ... die Zusammenhänge zwischen ihnen *sind* ja Fesseln.’<sup>625</sup> However, the white ribbons correct and shame the children on the initiative of the parents, a punitive symbol that is reappropriated by the child offenders themselves which reoccurs with the rope that lames the doctor’s horse at the beginning and those used to tie up the Baron’s son; these are designed for disruptive violence, rather than authoritative correction. The ropes’ corrective function affirms the childrens’ role in the network of brutality and deceit the village represents: ‘die Kinder reißen mit Bändern, Seilen und Schnüren die Macht der Symbolik an sich, um sich aus der Rolle des stummen Opfers zu befreien – und erhalten gleichzeitig das System aufrecht, das sie in vorbeugenden Maßnahmen geißelt.’<sup>626</sup> Yet Naqvi’s statement needs to be moderated: only the children who are deemed to perpetrate crimes are bound with the white ribbon, while the abused and bloodied disabled child is victimised by the mysterious perpetrators’ ropes (‘das Seil’) wielded against those in authority, or those who represent undesirable members of society: he is therefore excluded from the group of ‘ribbon-wearing’ perpetrators who wield their authority in the village while ostensibly being punished by their parents. This shows not that they are trying to break free of patriarchal repression, but they are trying to take control of it for themselves, pointing to the societal and power continuities as the children of 1914 become the adults of 1939 thus highlighting the ‘roter Faden’ of authority leading from First to Second World Wars. As Haneke states in his production notes to the film ‘die Geschichte nahm ein glückliches Ende: sie wurde nie aufgeklärt. Bei der Machtergreifung Hitlers waren unsere Helden zwischen 29 und 35 Jahre alt.’<sup>627</sup> Without singling out any perpetrators but by marking out an entire generation of perpetrators (with the exception of the disabled Karli) wearing the white ribbon, Haneke’s film argues how social coercion (and indeed, cohesion) occurs through

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<sup>625</sup> Elfriede Jelinek, ‘Bis Einem Licht aufgeht. Zum Filmemacher Michael Haneke’ in Fatima Naqvi, , *Trügerische Vertrautheit* (Wien: Synema, 2010), pp.iii-ix, p.vi, vii.

<sup>626</sup> Naqvi, p.145. Haneke in his production notes emphasises how the motif of the rope must inform all aspects of set design. See Haneke, ‘Liste der offenen Fragen’, Film Archiv Österreich, VL1/999: ‘Wagen mit Bändern / Pferde mit Bändern / Größeres Lederband.’

<sup>627</sup> Michael Haneke, Production notes, Film Archiv Österreich, VL/1252, p.11.

violence, for which bonds are not a corrective, but a symbol, which creates a powerful intertext with Aichinger's vacillation between victimhood and violence in her evaluation of the bound man.

Like Odysseus', the bound man's ropes may signify the dominant and estranging power of reason over nature: 'the estrangement from nature that [Odysseus] undertakes is completed in his self-abandonment to nature on which he measures himself.'<sup>628</sup> When the circus owner's wife unties him, he is weakened and is forced to shoot the wolf due to the insufficiency of his own strength: 'Die Schnur fiel auf der Seite an ihm herab und verwirrte sich, als er versuchte, sie auf der anderen von sich zu reißen. Er stieß die Frau zurück, aber seine Bewegungen trieben schon ins Ziellose. [...] Er fühlte plötzlich Schwäche' (28). His domination over nature is no longer an organic property (in the sense that the ropes have become part of the functioning of his physicality) but rather enabled by the gun, representing an outcome of the Odyssean repression of instinct in technical and industrial progress, whose aim is to control and neutralise of the forces of nature. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the process of dominating nature by measuring oneself against it 'constitutes men as selves and separates them from the animal.'<sup>629</sup> Yet, his unbinding and subsequent shooting of the wolf provoke a shameful reaction, whereby the man runs away from the circus and hides in the bushes. The shame that accompanied his binding – the moment of repression – also accompanies the climax of his domination of nature. It is a shame which, for Adorno and Horkheimer accompanies the formation of subjectivity in and through violence.

### **“From the end and to the end”: Existentialism and the refusal of narrative closure**

By the end of the story, the bound man appears both as victim – of the violent act of unbinding – and as perpetrator, of the act of killing the wolf, for which he is persecuted. The ropes have come to define his identity as traumatic, and he is compromised with the loss of his status as a victim. As Aichinger has said elsewhere: 'Wie soll ich denn die Trauer nicht halten wollen, wenn ich / mich in nichts anderem finden kann als in ihr?'<sup>630</sup> The bound man's ropes point to the noose around the arsonist's neck in the final story of *Der Gefesselte* 'Rede unter dem Galgen', where the condemned man's ropes act as a memento of impending death and new beginning 'weil das Ende nie ein Ende hat' (102). Yet, the bleak final image of the story,

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<sup>628</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, p.114.

<sup>629</sup> *Ibid.*, p.133.

<sup>630</sup> Ilse Aichinger, *Aufzeichnungen* 1950-1985 (Leipzig: Reclam, 1987), p.11.

in which snow reveals the onset of winter, stasis and death ('In der Morgendämmerung schien es ihm, als trüge das Wasser Eisschollen, als wäre drüben in den Auen schon Schnee gefallen, der die Erinnerung nimmt', 29), may seem more redemptive via a reading of St Paul, featuring the motif of unbinding. Before his release from his ropes, the physical decay of the bound man becomes clear throughout the story, the circus owner's wife is concerned that his joints will become exposed because of the painful chafing of the bonds: 'Es schien ihr wieder sicher, dass er mit dem Zirkus ziehen würde, bis ihm die Haut vom Fleisch fiel' (23). A release from the ropes could correlate with a redemptive vision of man's release from bodily vulnerability as expressed in Paul's letter to the Romans 8:21-22: 'Because creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail until now.' This image of 'unbinding' as accompanying the Final Judgement reflects the same messianic and apocalyptic view of the creaturely tendency to violence and its resolution at the end of time as that expressed by Wittig in *Die Kreatur* in 1929. Yet Aichinger's constant 'Spielraum' of beginnings and endings – and of endings as endings – constantly defers this ultimate resolution.

By linking the process of being untied to the narratological device of 'dénouement', Aichinger may be claiming that writing may achieve this aim, namely the collapse of violence through the subversion of the nexus of dominance, difference and victimhood. Firstly, the story builds up to a 'Dénouement'; secondly, read intertextually with Aichinger's poetological essay 'Das Erzählen in dieser Zeit', the importance of endings as beginnings play a significant role in the author's creative project. Firstly, in Gustav Freytag's analysis of Ancient Greek and Roman theatre, he notes that the term 'dénouement', literally the unknotting, or the untying of the plot, generally signifies the restoration of order. Indeed, this could be said to apply to the bound man: just as he is about to be attacked by a wolf, the animal tamer's wife cuts the man's ropes and they collapse in a heap on the floor, leaving him more freedom of movement.<sup>631</sup> However, the 'dénouement' of the story, corresponding to the moment the bound man is untied, is not accompanied by a sense of liberation or freedom, but rather of humiliation and death: he is ashamed of the laughter that accompanies his unbinding, he hides from view like a wounded animal and contemplates an icy landscape symbolising death and stasis. The beauty of the bound man's tricks before his attack on the wolf counter the damaging, interruptive force of trauma and convert into productive self-expression; his resorting to violence and domination of other creatures ends the story. In her essay 'das Erzählen in dieser Zeit' Aichinger describes

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<sup>631</sup> Gustav Freytag, *The Technique of Drama*, tr. Gustav Freytag (London: Bibliobazaar, 2008), p.155

the importance of telling stories with an awareness of the end, both in a narratological and eschatological sense: ‘Wenn wir es richtig nehmen können wir [...] gerade vom Ende her und auf das Ende hin zu erzählen beginnen, und die Welt geht uns wieder auf.’<sup>632</sup> The bound man experiences the unknotting as an ending and a new beginning under a moon with ‘zugleich die Farbe des Wachstums und des Todes’ (27), indicates Aichinger’s refusal to pen her hopes of either beginning or endings and instead creating a ‘Spielraum’ (evoking the space between the man’s body and the ropes ‘auch seinen Armen, die man ihm nicht an den Leib, sondern nur aneinander gebunden, was Spielraum gegeben’, 12), a space of play in which new creative formations and linguistic and figurative constellations may appear: ‘So können alle, die in irgendeiner Form die Erfahrung des nahen Todes gemacht haben, diese Erfahrung nicht wegdenken, sie können, wenn sie ehrlich sein wollen, sich und die anderen nicht freundlich darüber hinwegtrösten. Aber sie können ihre Erfahrung zum Ausgangspunkt nehmen, um das Leben für sich und für anderen neu zu entdecken.’<sup>633</sup>

The bound man presents symptoms of trauma due to his attack, as well as examples of violent acts towards animals, and a suspicious violent past (due to the presence of his knife as a defining pre-binding possession). On the one hand, he can be identified as a victim of perpetratorless violence disrupting the link between action and retribution, therefore naturalising the bound man’s punishment as the result of his alterity. On the other, given the mention of the knife and the eeriness of his personality, he may have been bound as retribution for a previous violent act. As a victim of a violent act with no perpetrators, or as the receiver of a retribution with no deed and no judge, the bound man’s destiny seems to be out of his own hands, however it is crucial that he chooses to remain bound and decides to restrict his movement to the give that the ropes allow, assuming ultimate responsibility for his actions within his creaturely, traumatic embodiment: ‘Alle Möglichkeiten liegen in dem Spielraum der Fesselung’ (13).

In this way, Aichinger paves a way for creatureliness and responsibility to go hand in hand as the man’s existence is dictated by the contingencies of his circumstances facing the immediacy of violence and death which he accepts and choses to adapt to, making the bound man a literary exponent of the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus’ philosophy of the ‘absurd’. Indeed, Aichinger’s short story was included in the anthology *The*

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<sup>632</sup> Ilse Aichinger, ‘Das Erzählen in dieser Zeit’ in *Ilse Aichinger: Leben und Werk*, ed. by Samuel Moser (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1995), pp.86-87.

<sup>633</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

*Existential Imagination* because it thematises the relationship between freedom and restriction, evoking one of the central problems regarding the consensus with Nazism and the refusal to dissent: ‘he makes himself a free man by working within the restrictions of his ropes.’<sup>634</sup> Aichinger was interested in the notion of existence: ‘Dieses Existenzsein, ob man schon lebt oder tot ist, ob man schon da war oder nie da war, das ist für mich ein Begriff.’<sup>635</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre defines existentialism in his lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism* as ‘a humanism because we remind man that there is no legislator other than himself and that he must, in his abandoned state, make his own choices.’<sup>636</sup> Sartre envisages existentialism as a space for action and responsibility in spite of despotic, constraining circumstances, making it a philosophy of freedom in the aftermath of the Nazi occupation of France and Pétain’s collaborationist government. Camus’ notion of existentialism asserts the possibility of a creaturely existentialism unlike Sartre with his conception of existence based on inextinguishable vitality in the face of violence and annihilation; Segre Doubrovsky’s poetic appraisal of the ethical value of Camus’ existentialism in *The Stranger* also applies to *Der Gefesselte*:

Muscular indolence and eurhythmy reign without contest. Animality is fully accepted [...] Threatened with annihilation, life gathers and concentrates its force, becomes conscious of itself and proclaims that it is the only value: “and I, too, felt ready to start life all over again.”<sup>637</sup>

Jonathan Judaken illuminatingly inscribes existentialism into a modernist, twentieth century cultural and historical trajectory by arguing that the philosophy responds to a

set of modern problems: the question of subjectivity, how to forge a postmetaphysical ethics, how to ground truth in differing perspectives, how to theorise in ways that are not reducible to a constricting logic or mode of rationality, how to construct social systems that do not construct crushing conformity or homogenising uniformity, and how to communicate this in a way that speaks to others so that they [...] begin to smash those elements that are stunting their own lives.<sup>638</sup>

The bound man gives up a former life of possession and competition (he immediately reaches for his wallet and his knife) in favour of movement, physicality, creaturely existence in which his bonds enable action and responsibility. When they are cut as a result of the

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<sup>634</sup> Frederick Karl and Leo Hamalian, *The Existential Imagination* (London: Picador, 1973), p.28.

<sup>635</sup> Radisch.

<sup>636</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, tr. Carole Macomber (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 2007), p.53

<sup>637</sup> Serge Doubrovsky, ‘The Ethics of Albert Camus’ in *Albert Camus*, ed. by Harold Bloom (London: Chelsea House, 2003), pp.95-113, p.99.

<sup>638</sup> Jonathan Judaken, ‘Introduction’ in *Situating Existentialism: Key Texts in Context*, ed. by Jonathan Judaken and Roberto Bernasconi (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), pp.1-36, p.8.



woman's act of pity, he is robbed of his vitality and returns to being the limited man he was before:

die Schnur fiel auf der einen Seite an ihm herab und verwirrte sich, als er versuchte, sie auf der anderen vor sich zu reißen. [...] seine Bewegungen trieben schon ins Ziellose. [...] Er stand im Inneren des Käfigs, während er die Fessel wie die Reste einer Schlangenhaut vor sich riß. Es erheiterte ihn, die Zuschauer ringsumher zurückweichen zu sehen. Wußten sie, dass er jetzt keine Wahl hatte? Zugleich schien ihm alles Blut nach unten zu strömen. Er fühlte plötzlich Schwäche.' (28)

Without the ropes, he is a man like the others with recourse to tools and technology that exert power over others, and no longer enjoys the potential freedom owed to the fact that he could undo his ropes at any time, making him master of his own destiny. As Aichinger acknowledges, taking charge of one's own existence has a price: 'es ist natürlich komplizierter, schwieriger, es fordert eine gewisse Askese, existent zu sein.'<sup>639</sup> The woman's unbinding of the man dissolves his identity, his freedom and his responsibility; on the one hand, this may symbolise the shattering effect of intervening in the embodiment of other living beings, one of the most disturbing legacies of Nazism and the Second World War. Yet, on the other, the unbinding, motivated by the woman's pity for the bound man, may work as an admonition to those experiencing compassion on the grounds of Schoonover's 'spectacular suffering' – the bound man may well be guilty, and the ropes act as his punishment, his suffering as a result of this may appear to class him as a victim, when in fact he does not warrant compassion. By cutting his ropes, the woman provokes a shameful reaction in the potentially guilty man for his undeserved reprieve.

Thus, Aichinger's 'Der Gefesselte' reconciles a traumatic, disempowered creaturely embodiment as a result of transformative violence with a mode of existence within limitations and constrictions that allows for the recovery of agency and responsibility. Nevertheless, the unwarranted compassion that the collapse of physical suffering into victimhood provokes forecloses the possibility of self-determination and responsibility, and are therefore viewed cautiously in this narrative.

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<sup>639</sup> Iris Radisch, *op.cit.*

**‘Qui veut faire l’ange fait la bête’<sup>640</sup> – The embodied legacy of Auschwitz in *Angelica Farfalla* and *Versamina***

Aichinger’s work promotes an ethics of suspicion and deferral in her language rooted in the persecutory violence at the origins of her writing, evident in her essay ‘Aufruf zum Mißtrauen’ and forty years later ‘Rede an die Jugend’ where she states:

die Wörter müssen neu erkämpft werden, gerade in einer Zeit, die geneigt ist, sie über die Welt zu streuen und unbrauchbar zu machen, die sie in den Ohren dröhnen und nicht zu sich kommen läßt. [...] Auch “VATERLAND” also, für viele ein schützendes und beschütztes Wort, muß man jeden Augenblick bedenken.<sup>641</sup>

Concepts and words tied to pressured historical moments of violence (‘Rede an die Jugend’ is dedicated to Hans and Sophie Scholl) require constant interrogation and reconfiguration in Aichinger’s view, evincing what Nantwich has called her ‘Skepsis gegen den kurzen Wegen der Welterklärung.’<sup>642</sup>

Conversely, as Levi considered writing to be a public service, he saw it as the writer’s duty to make himself understood by the reader (albeit a receptive one): ‘se [il lettore] non intende un testo, la colpa è dell’autore ... sta allo scrittore di farsi capire da chi desidera capirlo.’<sup>643</sup> In ‘a un giovane lettore’ Levi states, ‘Non è detto che un testo chiaro sia elementare; può avere vari livelli di lettura, ma il livello più basso, secondo me, dovrebbe essere accessibile ad un pubblico vasto’<sup>644</sup> and in his essay ‘Alla Nostra Generazione’: ‘fin dal mio primo libro *Se questo è un uomo* ho desiderato che i miei scritti [...] fossero letti come opere collettive, come una voce che rappresentasse altre voci.’<sup>645</sup> ‘Dello scrivere oscuro’ criticises writers such as Paul Celan and Georg Trakl for their hermeticism: ‘non è una comunicazione, non è un

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<sup>640</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, tr. A. Krailshamer (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), p.215.: ‘Man is neither angel nor beast, and the misery of it is that he who would act the angel acts the beast.’

<sup>641</sup> Ilse Aichinger, ‘Rede an die Jugend’ in Moser, p.21: ‘Words must be fought out again, right at a time that is inclined to disperse them all over the world and make them unusable, in a time that drums them into your ears without allowing them to come to you.’

<sup>642</sup> Andreas Nentwich, ‘Die Orten, die wir sahen, sehen uns an’, *Die Zeit*, 31.10.2001: <http://www.korrespondenzen.at/Pdf/Aichinger/Ilse%20Aichinger%20-%20Kurzschlusse.pdf> [Last Accessed: June 2013].

<sup>643</sup> Primo Levi, *L’altrui mestiere* (Torino: Einaudi, 1995), p.51. ‘If the reader does not understand a text it is the writer’s fault. The writer must be understood by whomever wishes to understand him’

<sup>644</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 236-237: ‘A clear text does not have to be a simple one; it may be read on different levels, but the most basic level must be accessible to a vast audience.’

<sup>645</sup> Primo Levi, ‘Alla nostra generazione...’, in Primo Levi, *Opere II*, ed. by Marco Belpoliti (Torino: Einaudi, 1997), pp. 1351-2, p.1351; On Levi’s testimonial vocabulary, see Franca Molino Signorini, ‘The Duty and Risk of Testimony: The Writer as Keeper of Memory’ in *Memory and Mastery: Primo Levi as Writer and Witness*, ed. by Roberta S. Kremer (New York: SUNY, 2001), pp.173-196; on the concept of generation and legacy in Levi’s work, Mirna Cicioni, “Do not call us teachers”: Primo Levi and the Next Generations’ in *Primo Levi: An Austere Humanist* ed. by Joseph Farrell (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004), pp.19-36: ‘ever since my very first book *Se questo è un uomo* I have wanted my writings to be read as collective works, as a voice representing other voices.’

linguaggio, o al più un linguaggio buio e monco, qual è appunto quello di colui che sta per morire’<sup>646</sup> Levi polices testimonial writing, which – in the name of ‘diffusione e perennità’ (transmission and perennial relevance) – must not lend itself to ‘interpretazioni equivoche’ (equivocal interpretations).<sup>647</sup> Thus, by criticising authors whose approach to writing and particularly testimony are too obscure to appeal to most readers, Levi establishes himself as an authoritative witness with a universal relevance to a multitude of readers. The primordially of Levi’s voice and influence in post-war Italy reached almost beatifying levels, as Agamben’s statement shows: ‘Levi is the perfect witness; when he returns home, he tirelessly recounts his experiences to everyone.’<sup>648</sup> Unlike Aichinger whose deconstructive approach to post-war human identity aims not to impose interpretive frameworks but rather encourage scepticism and critique, Levi orients the reader’s response to the text which he sees as having a general, moral, *human* value against which the animal is offset:

Mi diverte molto trovare tutti i riferimenti incrociati tra il comportamento umano e quello animale. [...] È un interesse che ho per un problema così rilevante: per quanto c’è di animale in noi, quanto c’era di animale nei nazisti. Penso ancora che una delle radici del nazismo fosse zoologico.<sup>649</sup>

Given his assertion in *I sommersi e i salvati* that those who perished in the camps, the *Muselmänner*, the ‘drowned’, are the only true witnesses (‘sono loro, i “mussulmani”, i sommersi, i testimoni integrali, coloro la cui deposizione avrebbe avuto un significato generale.’), and any testimony about Auschwitz, according to Levi, has to be about the fate of the survivors, but also of the ‘drowned’, and can therefore only be ‘un racconto di terzi.’<sup>650</sup>

The two stories I will analyse in this final section are about the conundrums of third-party narrating on behalf of dehumanised creaturely victims. Using the pseudonym ‘Malabaila’ or ‘bad wetnurse’, Levi’s ‘German stories’ ‘Angelica Farfalla’ and ‘Versamina’ convey a sense of abject creation and a violent intervention in human embodiment. The OED definitions of

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<sup>646</sup> *Ibid.* p.53: ‘it does not communicate, it is not a language, at most it is a dark and maimed language, the language of someone who is about to die’

<sup>647</sup> *Ibid.* p.50.

<sup>648</sup> Agamben, 1999, p.16. Recent debates have declaimed Sergio Luzzato’s investigation of Levi’s role in the Resistance and the murder of fascist accomplices as attempts to smear his name, and bring to light the ‘dark’ side of Primo Levi. See Paolo Mieli’s discussion of ‘il segreto brutto di Primo Levi’ in ‘I compagni dimenticati di Primo Levi’ in *Corriere della Sera* 16.04.2013, and a response by Alberto Cavaglioni, ‘La verità sul segreto brutto di Primo Levi’ in *La Stampa* 02.06.2013. See also Sergio Luzzato, *Partigia: Una storia della Resistenza* (Milano: Mondadori, 2013), pp.85-89.

<sup>649</sup> Primo Levi, ‘Conversazione con Paolo Valabrega’ in *Primo Levi* ed. by Marco Belpoliti (Milan: MunosY Munos, 1991), p.77.

<sup>650</sup> Primo Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati* in *Opere II*, pp.1055-56. ‘they, the ‘Muselmänner’, the drowned, are the only whole witnesses, their statements are the only ones that would have had an all-encompassing validity.’/ ‘a third-party tale’

creatureliness come into play here, namely the moral and emotional colouring of the living being who may be either despised or pitied, and the idea of the creature as an abject being, created to do someone's bidding. 'Angelica Farfalla', first published in the newspaper *il Giorno* in 1961 and then printed in his collection *Storie Naturali* (1966) is, with 'Versamina', one of the stories with the clearest link to the Holocaust in the collection, about which Levi said, 'non per caso mi sono venuti ambientati in Germania.'<sup>651</sup> Contemporary reviewers also saw an urgent message in Levi/Malabaila's short stories, namely a plea for the safeguarding of mankind in the world of industrial and scientific progress which many writers saw as being a direct, dehumanising consequence of the nightmare of the *univers concentrationnaire*:

Dal campo di concentramento alla società tecnocratica sono passati vent'anni e il linguaggio con cui uno scrittore affronta le due situazioni deve essere ovviamente diverso: ma il problema rimane uguale. Ed è il problema, decisivo, della sopravvivenza dell'uomo.<sup>652</sup>

As Gordon argues in his illuminating study of the Holocaust and its reverberations in Italian culture after World War II, 'interrogating the "humanist" and partly Christianising topos of Man as a part of a response to the Holocaust is a telling feature of this postwar moment more widely.'<sup>653</sup> Thus, the notion of the 'human' is both cast under suspicion and exalted as the ultimate rationale in the traumatic aftermath of the war and the Holocaust, which represent, according to Gordon, 'a perfectly rational and *inhuman* end, pursued through the "means" of millions of men, with extreme violence and pure reason producing immense suffering and [...] paradoxically vast reserves of residual humanity.'<sup>654</sup> However, 'the residual humanity' is a fragile one as Levi shows in *Storie Naturali*, where the human remains a category to be salvaged for ethical reasons. As Robert Gordon and Damiano Benvegnù note 'the possibly-not-quite-human of Auschwitz challenges our deepest sense of what the human being can contain, whilst (possibly) still remaining human.'<sup>655</sup> Roberto Farneti, argues that these stories convey the 'crucial abomination perpetrated at Auschwitz', namely mankind's loss of the 'age-old

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<sup>651</sup> Interview with Primo Levi, in *Il Giorno* 12.10.1966.

<sup>652</sup> Anon., 'Le *Storie Naturali* di Primo Levi contro la civiltà delle macchine', *Il nostro tempo*, 13.11.1966. Twenty years have passed since the concentration camp and the advent of technocratic society and the language a writer uses to approach the two must obviously be different. But the problem has stayed the same. And it is the crucial problem of the survival of mankind.'

<sup>653</sup> Robert S. C. Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture 1944-2010* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), p.53. Gordon cites Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* (1946), Natalia Ginzburg's essay 'Il figlio dell'uomo' (1946) and Alberto Moravia's *L'uomo come fine* (1954) as examples of this preoccupation with "man" as a problematic, yet ultimately redemptive, notion in Italy. Wider European case studies of this discourse may include Levinas's *L'Humanisme de l'autre* (1972) which investigates the possibility of humanism after the Holocaust, and Hannah Arendt's influential *The Human Condition* (1958).

<sup>654</sup> *Ibid.*, p.114.

<sup>655</sup> Robert Gordon and Damiano Benvegnù, 'Primo Levi's Animals'. Unpublished conference presentation: 'Humanity and Animality in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century culture', University College London, September 15, 2015. I am grateful to Professor Gordon and Dr Benvegnù for sharing the manuscript of their paper with me.

privilege of being capable of consciously and willingly performing an action.’<sup>656</sup> The emphasis on the experience of violence, a sublime insight into the nature of mankind for some commentators on Levi, is manipulated in ‘Angelica Farfalla’ and ‘Versamina’: suffering does not invite vicarious identification, but is rather rejected as an unsound foundation of subjectivity and survival. Finally, I will build upon Farneti’s insightful analysis by showing that Levi’s anxiety surrounding the degradation of the human and the disempowerment of agency tap into a particular culture of what Gordon has called ‘Holocaust talk’ in 1960s Italy.<sup>657</sup>

In ‘Angelica Farfalla’, a German doctor named Prof. Leeb conducts experiments on four prisoners. During the course of the experiment the four human beings are transformed into beasts and eventually eaten by the starving population of wartime Berlin. Levi’s ‘third-hand’ tale renders the creatures voiceless, as a German girl relates their story.<sup>658</sup>

The four prisoners experimented upon by Leeb are initially described as being human ‘erano molto magri e non alzavano il capo: erano due uomini e due donne’/ ‘they were very thin and did not raise their heads: there were two men and two women’(43), they are progressively transformed by Prof. Leeb’s experiments until their humanity is put into question: ‘sembrava che fossero morti o dormissero’/ ‘they seemed to be either dead or asleep’(44). The third-party narrator notes that the next time the children peek into the room, ‘non c’erano più pagliericci né persone. C’erano quattro pali messi per traverso a mezza altezza, e quattro bestacce posate sopra’/ ‘there were no longer any mats, nor people. There were four posts arranged across the roof reaching half way up to the ceiling, and four beasts perched on them’ (43). The grotesque beings that remain after the four prisoners’ transformation are described as giant, unattractive vultures ‘sembravano avvoltoi’, but they also look like mummies, dead, inanimate artefacts which further emphasises their dehumanisation: ‘assomigliavano alle teste delle mummiee che si vedono nei musei’/ ,they looked like the mummies you see in museums’(43). The prevalence of verbs indicating the speaker’s uncertainty as to what she has seen (*sembrare*, *assomigliare*) reveal not only the use of animal imagery to attempt to integrate these biological aberrations into a conceivable epistemological framework, but also the uncertainty as to the ontological status of the beasts which degrades them to the extent that they are eaten by their neighbours. The metamorphosis of the human

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<sup>656</sup> Farneti, p.730.

<sup>657</sup> Gordon 2012, p.114,140.

<sup>658</sup> Giorgio Agamben’s *Remnants of Auschwitz* concludes with a collection of testimonies told from the perspective of the Muselmann by the survivors, sublimating the position of trauma and abjection; see Agamben, 1999, pp.166-172; For LaCapra’s critique, see LaCapra, 2004, p.173; 2009, p.103.

beings into half-formed vulture-like beasts is an ironic prefiguration of their death: ‘ali per modo di dire, con poche penne rade ... sembravano le ali dei polli arrosto’/‘basically like wings, with a few thin feathers...they looked roast chicken feathers’ (43) The Berliners devour the remnants of the prisoners (‘li avevano già fatti a pezzi’,45): the community’s cannibalism acknowledges Leeb’s dehumanisation of the creatures. The manipulation of any animal or human forms is depicted with extreme suspicion in Levi’s secular, wartime universe.

Indeed, Leeb’s experiments aimed to recognise and bring out the future evolutionary stage of mankind, based on the exceptional capacity of the axolotl to procreate at the larvae stage and therefore evolve very quickly: ‘Questa condizione non sia così eccezionale come sembra: che altri animali, forse molti, forse tutti, forse anche l’uomo, abbiano qualcosa in serbo, una potenzialità, una ulteriore capacità di sviluppo’/ ‘This condition may not be as exceptional as it seems: other animals, maybe many, many all animals, perhaps even man, may have something in store, some potential, a further capacity to evolve’ (42). For Moravia, this entails a degradation of mankind and a denial of what is sacred and inviolable within him: ‘Degradato da fine a mezzo tra gli altri mezzi, la rassomiglianza dell’uomo con gli altri animali si accentua.’

<sup>659</sup> The presence of the vulture-like beings echo the story ‘Pieno Impiego’, where Simpson, the American inventor, symbol of techno-capitalist *hubris*, tells a joke: ‘Una vecchia storia vero? Inventi il fuoco e lo doni agli uomini, poi un avvoltoio ti rode il fegato per l’eternità’/‘It’s an old story isn’t it? You invent fire and give it to men, and then a vulture gnaws your liver for eternity.’<sup>660</sup> The image of the vulture is an ill omen of the distorting excesses of science in the name of the perfectibility of man, echoing Moravia’s plea for the legacy of the Holocaust and the war to be the recognition of man as an ‘end’ and no longer as a means. The instrumentalisation of man diminishes his recognisability as an ethical subject leading to the violent cannibalism of the creaturely beasts; unlike Aichinger whose problematisation of the animal/human boundary deconstructs categorisation and exclusion, Levi seems in ‘Angelica Farfalla’ to be undertaking the same exclusionary process as the German scientists by noting that the degradation of the human invites violence and persecution. Langbein notes how camp survivors also cite the abject degradation which contradicts the moral authority of the witness:

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<sup>659</sup> Alberto Moravia, ‘L’uomo come fine’ [1954] in *L’uomo come fine* (Milano: Bompiani, 1964), pp.193-248, p.225.

<sup>660</sup> Primo Levi, ‘Pieno impiego’, *Tutti i racconti*, pp.124-135(p.135). The grotesqueness of Levi’s creations reveal the despotism of the literary creator, as writing enables him to experiment with this body and universe building that his scientists risk in ‘Storie Naturali’: ‘lo scrivere è creativo ovvero concede qualche momento di creazione e consente di veder crescere la propria creatura.’ Cited by Stefano Bartezzaghi, ‘Cosmichimiche’ in *Primo Levi*, ed. Belpoliti, 1991, pp.267-314(p.275).

‘queste figure erano creature all’ultimo stadio dell’essere umano, anche se oramai si comportavano soltanto come animali selvatici.’<sup>661</sup> The Berliners are unable to resist their roast chicken wings.

The title of the story ‘Angelica Farfalla’ in the tenth canto of Dante’s *Purgatorio* is indicative of Levi’s attitude to the relationship of the abject, the limits of man and the sacred aspect of humanity. Levi’s intertextuality with Dante firstly alludes to the perverted angelic metamorphosis staged by Leeb; secondly, to the impossibility of forgiveness for the barbarism perpetrated in the context of the Holocaust, which Levi saw as a uniquely German crime. Purgatory is a space of atonement and redemption, which the narrative forecloses. Thirdly, ‘Angelica Farfalla’ alludes to the dangers of believing in the ‘perfectibility’ of the human form in the name of transcendental or ideological beliefs.

It is significant that the title of the story is drawn from lines 100-139 of the tenth canto of *Purgatorio* where Dante encounters those atoning for the sin of pride, who are learning to accept that humans are but ‘vermi’ (worms) and that attempts of the human intellect to go beyond this form are proud and sacrilegious as they seek God-like knowledge and control, which is impossible for mankind. Pride represents the first step towards violence towards others in the belief of one’s own superiority:

non v’accorgete voi che noi siam vermi  
nati a formar l’angelica farfalla,  
che vola a la giustizia senza schermi?<sup>662</sup>

*Is it not clear to you  
that we are caterpillars born, and must  
become the angelic butterfly that sails  
Defenceless up to judgement* <sup>663</sup>

The manipulation of the chemistry of human life for the sake of its affirmation and transcendence by paradoxically putting human beings at peril is institutionally condoned, thus the success of Leeb’s attempts to start the experiment: ‘se la teoria era in armonia coll’ambiente, non occorreva molta documentazione perché venisse varata e trovasse accoglienza, anche molto in su’/ ‘if the theory was in the spirit of the times, not much

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<sup>661</sup> Langbein, p.113.

<sup>662</sup> Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, Purg. X, 124-6 (Milano: Mondadori, 2007)

<sup>663</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, tr. Clive James (London: Picador, 2013), p.226.

documentation was needed for it be passed and approved, even much higher up'(40). The regime condones the manipulation of physical bodies for the sake of racial purity and human perfectibility, yet all that is left of the prisoners is 'sangue, cemento, pipì di gatto e di topo, crauti, birra, la quintessenza della Germania insomma'/'blood, cement, cat and rat piss, sauerkraut, beer, basically the essence of Germany' (40). The victims of totalitarian, violent regimes are disgusting in 'Angelica Farfalla', undercutting the sublimating discourse of victimisation in critiques such as Agamben's and in pleas for the creaturely victim to paradoxically reinforce notions of humanity. As Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman criticise, trauma becomes elevated in discourse to – defined as the 'scar' of a tragic event on an individual who by virtue of his association with such an event becomes a victim –

a testimony that also bears witness to the persistence of the human even in those extreme situations that threaten to dehumanise the victims. Some element of human inexorably resists dehumanisation [...] trauma is both the product of an experience of inhumanity and the proof of the humanity of those who have endured it.<sup>664</sup>

Yet Levi's comment on the abomination of the manipulation of the human form in 'Angelica Farfalla' disables any form of empathy for the victims' experience of violence and forecloses the sublimation of this experience. Ingested and rejected by the human community surrounding them, the beings chime with Elias Canetti's description of the purpose of totalitarianism, namely to drain, dehumanise and exploit its human subjects; the only traces of the prisoners are remnants which testify to their ontological indeterminacy between animal, human, food, inanimate objects:

Was übrig bleibt, ist Abfall und Gestank. Dieser Vorgang der am Ende jeder animalistischen Bemächtigung steht, ist aufschlußreich für das Wesen der Macht überhaupt. Wer über Menschen herrschen will, sucht sie zu erniedrigen; ihnen Widerstand und ihre Rechte abzulisten, bis sie ohnmächtig vor ihm sind wie Tiere. Als Tiere verwendet er sie [...] Sein letztes Ziel ist immer, sie sich ,einzuverleiben' und sie auszusaugen, es ist ihm gleichgültig was von ihnen übrigbleibt.<sup>665</sup>

### **'Versamina': The creaturely distortions of suffering**

Primo Levi's embodied images of creaturely suffering in 'Versamina' problematise the humanising interpretation of trauma: in his tale of a drug that turns all pain into pleasure set in

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<sup>664</sup> Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma*, tr. Rachel Gomme (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p.20.

<sup>665</sup> Elias Canetti, *Masse und Macht* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981), p. 231.



post-war Vienna, Levi deals with the shame of the sufferers, their dehumanisation, and the aversion their appearance provokes in onlookers. Here, the creaturely bodies of the drug users veer between the animal and human and the experience of pain causes the demolition of the subject and a deep shame in the animals and humans who experience the debasement of suffering. In 'Versamina', I argue that Levi contradicts the sublimating tendency of trauma and pain, cementing suffering as a profoundly ontologically disturbing experience that has little ethical or practical value.<sup>666</sup>

In the story, a man returns from exile to the laboratory where he worked before the war. He enquires after his friend, the chemist Kleber. The lab assistant Dymbowski explains Kleber's fate following his addiction to *versamine* drugs which convert pain into pleasure. Experiences which should have been painful provoke instead 'una sensazione strana, molto piacevole' (76), which compels sufferers to aggravate their wound, and paradoxically increase their pleasure: 'passai la giornata a toccarmi il cerotto' (77). However, not only humans, but also animals are prone to the destructive transformations of the *versamine*. A dose is administered to a mongrel, who begins to chew off its own tongue and scratch itself to death. As a result, the dog is distorted, and becomes creaturely, ontologically unstable: 'non era più un cane. Non c'era più niente di canino in lui [...] era un contro cane insomma' (79,80). When Kleber himself starts taking the drugs, his desire for suffering as a source of self-destructive pleasure dehumanises him 'cominciò a grattarsi in un modo feroce, come un cane, appunto, come se volesse scavarsi' (81). In his self-abasement, the narrator loses his human dignity and adopts the characteristics of the dog who first experienced the drugs: 'mi ricordava il suo predecessore, il cane bastardo, che si accucciava con le orecchie basse quando io lo sorprendevo a fare le cose al contrario' (83). Finally, the narrator gives an example of a dangerous political application of this drug: American soldiers are given doses in Korea, in the hope that pleasure in suffering will make them fearless and noble, but the effect is quite the opposite, they allow themselves to be abjectly massacred: 'si [sono] comportato in modo abbietto ed assurdo, e che per di più si [sono] fatti ammazzare tutti quanti' (82). The takers of *versamine* are therefore twofold creatures: they are products of the external influence of the drugs; secondly, they are no longer identifiable with their species, such is the debasing effect of suffering. Primo Levi's story represents creatures who are the result of an act of scientific experiment or creation, who

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<sup>666</sup> Bourke establishes the religious and spiritual value of pain in her chapter on the uses of pain in religious prayer rituals or conversion narratives in that it teaches submission, obedience and stoicism. As a mode of atoning for past sins, Bourke explains how pain can ultimately be seen as redemptive and salvatory. See Joanna Bourke, *The Story of Pain: From Prayer to Painkillers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp.88-130.

are abject beings that project their suffering through their bodily form and encapsulate the problematic juxtapositions of nobility and abjection, humanity and inhumanity that the concept of creatureliness encapsulates. Scientific endeavour, a trademark of the nobility of human rationality, becomes a vector for disempowering, painful dehumanisation. The figures in *Versamina* see their identity and agency wholly demolished as a result of the pleasurable indulgence in suffering which is simultaneously a shameful display of physical vulnerability: the scientist's eyes remind his assistant of that of a beaten dog. Due to its distorting effects, Primo Levi in his essay 'Contro il dolore' (Against Pain) states that the prevention of pain (which he describes as a 'substance' that 'pollutes every being') in others and oneself is the foundation of any ethical stance ('è difficile compito di ogni uomo diminuire quanto può ... il dolore') as for him trauma does not assert humanity, but rather radically undermines it.<sup>667</sup> Levi's own assertion of the continuity between the 'German stories' and his experience of concentration camp imprisonment can be historically contextualised in the debate surrounding vivisection in Italy that. Damiano Benvegnù illuminates the nexus of vivisection, Nazi war crimes and anxieties regarding the manipulation of organic forms according to Levi's ethics of testimony whereby the suffering other places an ethical demand on the reader. He states 'we cannot control [...] our inevitable corporeal embodiment' so our ethical indictment is to 'recognise the impossibility of avoiding pain due to our corporeal existence' and thereby 'recognise this impossibility in others.'<sup>668</sup> Yet, in 'Angelica Farfalla' and 'Versamina' Levi dramatizes the very difficulty of acknowledging and accommodating the shared capacity for suffering of all embodied beings, thereby articulating the difficulty of responding to the ethical imperative of the suffering other, and simultaneously discarding an attachment to a unified understanding of the integrity of the human body.

Just as the fate of the creatures in 'Angelica Farfalla' was narrated by a third-party witness, whose emotional transformation of them from human beings into edible roast chickens as a result of their degradation crystallises the abjection of suffering, in 'Versamina' the assistant describes Kleber's indulgence in suffering as 'a guardarli, era uno spettacolo orribile e affascinante' ('watching them was a horrific and fascinating spectacle', 78); he begins to act like the dog who loses his canine features by scratching himself violently and shamefully

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<sup>667</sup> Primo Levi, *L'altrui mestiere* in *Opere II* (Torino: Einaudi, 1997), p.675.

<sup>668</sup> Damiano Benvegnù, 'Witnessing Animal Suffering: Primo Levi on Animal Experimentation' in *Interpreting Primo Levi: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016), pp.83-96(p.90) This article contains many productive avenues for a discussion of 'Versamina' and 'Angelica Farfalla' but due to its publication during the final revision of the thesis there has not been time to discuss Benvegnù's illuminating research in more detail here.

hiding from sight in order to indulge his self-harm which is simultaneously an indulgence in his passivity to the drug. Paradoxically, by opting to take the ‘Versamina’, Kleber has opted out of his own capacity for agency with regard for his bodily integrity and his relation to pain. For Santner, the seal of “creatureliness” which in his view is a uniquely human property, is that it appropriates the debasement of animals, as a source of perverse pleasure of being submitted and exposed to what he calls the “excitations of power”,<sup>669</sup> that underwrite the creature’s inescapable enthrallment to power, which in Santner’s understanding, emanates from the symbolic order: “we become sexual in the human sense, when we have, so to speak been made over as creature, when our bodies have been intensified, amplified, by exposure not simply to the space of signification, the symbolic order, but to the point of exception that sustains this space.”<sup>670</sup> As I understand it this statement explains the *jouissance* provoked by the notion of passivity to an external, transformative, violent power which underlines one’s physical vulnerability through exposure to power, which is at once disempowering and exhilarating. I will expound on this problematic link of power and creatureliness in the final chapter on Cavani’s *il portiere di notte* and Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Salò*.

Yet for Levi pleasure-in-pain is a deeply unsettling dynamic, as pain is described as ‘il nostro guardiano’ (83): Dr Kleber and the dog are both denatured and ontologically altered through the manipulation of the significance of pain, and Levi’s story warns against this conversion. Suffering should not be willed, it should be avoided so that pleasure can be the reward of that avoidance in the narrator’s view: ‘se il dolore è il guardiano della vita, il piacere ne è lo scopo e il premio’ (‘If pain is the guardian of life, pleasure is its aim and its prize’, 84). In ‘Versamina’, suffering does not affirm life. The pathological conversion of suffering into pleasure removes all safeguards for the conservation of human and animal life if it merely becomes a way of experiencing one’s own vulnerability as a delight in the disempowering passivity that pain occasions. As Aichinger warns in *Die größere Hoffnung*: ‘wo es nicht mehr wehtut, dort wird es gefährlich.’<sup>671</sup> In this sense, I disagree with Neppi’s formulation about Levi’s ‘formal aberrations’ in *Storie Naturali*: ‘Ce sont des efforts obscures de la matière pour s’arracher à la loi aveugle qui la gouverne, pour engendrer la différence et la vie.’<sup>672</sup> The energy that Levi portrays is non-redemptive and destructive as well as being deeply shameful and disempowering, showing the unproductivity of sublimating pain as pleasure. The significance

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<sup>669</sup> Santner 2006, p.24.

<sup>670</sup> Santner 2006, p.194.

<sup>671</sup> Aichinger, 1948, p.112.

<sup>672</sup> Enzo Neppi, ‘Le hasard et la liberté : la représentation de la nature, de la vie et de l’homme dans l’oeuvre de Primo Levi’ in *Primo Levi : le double lien*, ed. by Walter Geerts (Paris : Ramsay, 2002), p.217-240, p.236.

of pain is crucial for an understanding of ‘Versamina’'s figures in pain as creatures: firstly, the creaturely relates to the experience of physical vulnerability, exposure and finitude; secondly, the collapse of the animal-human boundary symptomatizes the disturbance of identity and integrity of the bodies in the story; finally, Bourke asserts that ‘pain is practised within relational, environmental contexts’, and thus, the horrified reaction to the creature depicted as the human degraded to the level of the animal functions as a barometer for attitudes towards an embodiment that has become painful and embattled and therefore indicative of wider concerns surrounding the manipulation of the human being for industrial or political purposes.<sup>673</sup> Farneti's thesis that *Storie Naturali* represent the abdication of agency can therefore be complicated by the idea that Levi's creatures are political, intervening in a cultural landscape that was quick to disavow agency and responsibility in an Italian context and in the aftermath of fascism and Jewish persecution by Italians.

Contrarily to the creatures of ‘Versamina’ and ‘Angelica Farfalla’ who, despite their grizzly fates, comment on the responsivity of the body to the violent inscriptions of pain and suffering, and thus have a wider political and cultural significance by acting as a barometer for the transformation of mankind under the influence of biopolitical violence, Primo Levi's non-human register includes a the concept of *la bestia*, with a far narrower interpretive framework, symbolising only the hollowed out physicality without symbolic meaning that accompanies the end of the human being's life as a result of totalitarian violence. The ‘beast’ is not a dynamic and responsive concept in Levi, unlike that of the creature, rather it represents the disappearance of interpretive avenues and the progressive reification of the living being. In *Se questo è un uomo*, Levi notes how what he later called ‘i sommersi’'s ‘torpore opaco’ akin to that of ‘le bestie domate con le percosse.’<sup>674</sup> Whereas animals are by Levi-Strauss' account ‘good to think [with]’ ‘because their perceptible reality permits the embodiment of ideas and relations conceived by speculative thought on the basis of empirical observation’, beasts are not and Levi admonishes his reader and fellow survivors in his call to arms in the name of humanity within *Se questo è un uomo*:<sup>675</sup>

Perché il Lager è una gran macchina per ridurci a bestie, noi bestie non dobbiamo diventare [...] si deve voler sopravvivere [...] e per vivere è important sforzarci di salvare almeno lo scheletro, l'impalcatura, la forma

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<sup>673</sup> Bourke, p.5.

<sup>674</sup> Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, p.20.

<sup>675</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, *Totemism*, tr. by Rodney Needham (London: Beacon Press, 1963), p.89, 104.

della civiltà. [...] Dobbiamo camminare diritti, senza strascicare gli zoccoli, non già in omaggio alla disciplina prussiana, ma per restare vivi, per non cominciare a morire.<sup>676</sup>

The creature is what is what results of the human being trying not to die, the beast retains the basic physiological properties of a living being but is ontologically defunct. Robert Gordon notes that the bestialisation of the prisoners at Auschwitz evokes ‘the non- or better sub-human residue evoked by the title *If this is a Man*.’<sup>677</sup> Yet, Gordon goes on to note that animals have an ‘ethological’ function in Levi’s oeuvre, which he defines as ‘a means of defining complex behavioural mechanisms,’ therefore I would reword Gordon’s definition of the ‘beast’ in Levi’s work as the ‘sub-creatural’ residue, rather than a non- or sub-human one, (seemingly upholding an exclusionary devaluation of the animal) justifying why this concept remains, in the commentator’s view, the most ‘unelaborated’ in his work.<sup>678</sup> In a later short story ‘la bestia nel tempio’, a beast is imprisoned in a tall edifice, and whenever it attempts any escape, the walls narrow in on it. One of the spectators of the beast’s fate notes, ‘è prigioniera di sé stessa. Si chiude intorno tutte le vie d’uscita’<sup>679</sup> The ‘beast’ in Levi is not what Lucie Benchouicha has called ‘the regression to man’s most animal basis’, but rather, the complete denaturation of the living being into an unrecognisable and irresponsive physical mass, which has become symbolically useless, therefore deeply unsettling and dead-ended.<sup>680</sup>

Levi’s two ‘German’ stories suggest that the creature, as the battleground upon which a post-Auschwitz humanity and its embodiment will be fought, is a German creation; this polarises a humane, victimized Italy on the one hand and a barbaric, inhuman *Nazi* Germany on the other, as I will demonstrate in the following section where I conclude on how *Storie Naturali* deploy the creaturely as a mode of what Gordon has called ‘Holocaust talk’, namely the different cultural discourses reckoning with the legacies of persecution, occupation and fascism in Italy.

### **Primo Levi and Waldheim: Victims and perpetrators, barbarism and civility**

As a result of the great success of his first testimonial book *Se questo è un uomo* upon its second publication in 1958 and Levi’s own self-promotion as a unique and authoritative voice

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<sup>676</sup> Ibid., p.35.

<sup>677</sup> Robert S. C. Gordon and Marco Belpoliti, p.54.

<sup>678</sup> Ibid.

<sup>679</sup> Primo Levi, ‘La bestia nel tempio’, *Opere II*, pp.91-92, p.92.

<sup>680</sup> Benchouicha, 2006, p.10.

in Italian Holocaust testimonial writing and public discourse, Primo Levi's work has become a fundamental touchstone for Italian national identity in relation to Fascism and the Holocaust. By claiming that his voice functions as a collective one standing for victims everywhere, and indeed all of suffering humanity, Levi has – unintentionally – contributed to the obfuscation of Italy's crucial role in the deportation and persecution of Jews in accordance with fascist racial ideology. Mussolini's Italy introduced racial laws, emulating Germany's Nuremberg laws, as a result of the alliance with Nazi Germany. Furthermore, from 8 September, 1943 onwards, Italian fascists aided with the deportation and near extermination of the Italian Jewish population under orders from the administration of the 'puppet' state of the Republic of Salò.<sup>681</sup> Yet, an important counter-narrative contradicts the notion of Italian responsibility, namely the myth of the "italiani brava gente" – which has only recently been problematized – as well as the well-known references to Italians' solidarity with the plight of their Jewish compatriots.<sup>682</sup> As Gordon has perceptively underlined, discourse surrounding the Holocaust in Italy is fractured and multiple in that it crystallises wider debates about the nature of the Italian nation and Italian civic responsibility in the history of Fascism and the Holocaust:

Talk about the Holocaust in Italy is about a number of loaded, local issues of history and memory: complicity and victimhood, the nature and morality of violence in both Fascism and the Resistance, the history and myth of the Resistance, the nation-state (embodied in its army), myths and realities of national character and individuals' relation to the state, the general legacy of Fascism.<sup>683</sup>

In Gordon's analysis, Primo Levi articulates both national and international politics of memory and testimony. Levi's contributions to Italian public life as an authoritative witness (in 1973 he composed a bibliography of the Holocaust for schoolchildren, but also promoted new writing about the Holocaust through numerous prefaces and articles in the press) have moulded knowledge about the Holocaust in Italy as the 'profile of the Holocaust filtered through the values of a single individual, balanced between national (local, cultural, political) experience and politics – including his own political vision – and universal questions of history and morality.'<sup>684</sup> Thus, his output in the cultural and educational spheres have been instrumental in terms of the moulding and understanding of post-war Italian identity and responsibility.

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<sup>681</sup> See Michele Sarfatti, *La shoah in Italia. La persecuzione degli ebrei sotto il fascismo* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005).

<sup>682</sup> See Bidussa, *il mito del bravo italiano* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1994) and Andrea del Boca, *italiani brava gente? un mito duro a morire* (Milano: Neri Pozza, 2005). Susan Zuccotto, *Italians and the Holocaust* (New York: Basic Books, 1970) upholds this thesis.

<sup>683</sup> Robert C. Gordon, 'Whose Holocaust? Primo Levi and the Field of Holocaust Memory in Post-war Italy', *Italian Studies*, Vol.61, No.1 (Spring 2006), pp. 85-113, p.92.

<sup>684</sup> Gordon, 2012, p.68.

Levi underlined Italian involvement in the Holocaust, and the continuity of Fascist violence with that of Auschwitz in a 1973 interview with Turinese teenager Mario Pennacini. Here, he states that he would have rewritten *Se questo è un uomo* in a more political vein to indicate continuity between Fascism and Auschwitz: ‘oggi *Se questo è un uomo* lo riscriverei completamente, per mettere in luce le responsabilità italiane nella Shoah.’<sup>685</sup> He emphasises that ‘tendo a mettere in chiaro che c’è una linea diritta che parte dalle stragi di Torino del ‘22, e finisce ad Auschwitz. C’è una continuità abbastanza evidente.’<sup>686</sup> Yet, later essays that complement the publication of his last book *I sommersi e i salvati* (1987), emphasise Germany’s responsibility for the Holocaust’s atrocities, relativizing the Italian responsibility in the Holocaust’s unprecedented violence. In his essay on the German *Historikerstreit*, he counters relativizing claims by historians such as Nolte and Hillgruber by warning that ‘se la Germania d’oggi tiene al posto che le spetta fra le nazioni europee, non può e non deve sbiancare il suo passato.’<sup>687</sup> Furthermore, in an essay ‘I barbari della svastica’/‘the Barbarians of the Swastica’ published in 1983, ten years after his declarations about the Italian involvement in the genocide of the Jews in the Pennacini interview, Levi reports on the complicit enthusiasm of the Fascist press for the German military efforts preceding the so-called “Italian betrayal” of the Third Reich on September 8, 1943. After this date ‘nel giro di giorni, o addirittura di ore’ (“in a matter of a days, hours even”), Italian troops were being deported to the North and the Jews rounded up for the concentration camps. In his description of the atomisation of the Italian territory after the fall of Fascist Italy as an Ally of Nazi Germany, Levi sees the deportations as ‘un tragitto dalla casa e dalla patria verso il nulla; dalla civiltà verso le barbarie’/ ‘an itinerary from home and homeland towards nothingness: from civilisation to barbarity.’<sup>688</sup> After 8 September 1943, Italy is reframed as a victim in Levi’s essay as he describes the reprisals and deportations following Italy’s ‘tradimento’ (in quotation marks in Levi’s essay). From partisans, to men and women, to ‘poor people’ who are arrested in their homes - ‘Partigiani, avversari politici veri o presunti, ebrei, operai scesi in sciopero, uomini e donne, povera gente sorpresa in casa o in strada’ – the salt-of-the-earth humanity of Italy is compromised by the

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<sup>685</sup> Primo Levi, interviewed by Marco Pennacini, ‘Dal Fascismo ad Auschwitz, c’è una linea diritta’ in *L’Unità*, 26.01.2011, pp.36-7, p.36. See also: Marco Pennacini, interview with Primo Levi, in Fondo Pennacini, Archivio Centro Primo Levi, Turin: ‘today I would completely rewrite *Se Questo è un uomo* to bring Italy’s responsibility for the Shoah to light’, pp. 33-37, p.36.

<sup>686</sup> *Ibid.* p. 37: ‘I want highlight that there is a direct line that starts at the 1922 Turin massacres and ends up in Auschwitz. There’s a pretty obvious continuity’

<sup>687</sup> Primo Levi, ‘Il buco nero di Auschwitz’, in Primo Levi, *Opere II*, ed. by Marco Belpoliti (Torino: Einaudi, 1997), pp.1321-1324, p.1324: ‘If today’s Germany wants the role that it is due among the European nations, then it must not and cannot whitewash its own past’

<sup>688</sup> Primo Levi, ‘I barbari della svastica’, in *Opere II*, pp.1187-1188, p.1188.

indiscriminate violence of Nazi Germany. Levi concludes that ‘nell’universo nazista, non c’era posto per l’umanità.’<sup>689</sup>

Indeed, despite his acknowledgement of Italy’s culpability in the mass deportations from Italian soil ten years previously, his 1983 essay ‘il faraone con la svastica’ cements his conception of Italy as a victimised home and homeland (*casa e patria*) under siege by barbaric Teutonic assailants. Upon hearing about the Armistice, Levi and his friends hope for peace (‘ecco, era la pace, e con la pace il ritorno alle leggi giuste, all’uguaglianza, alla fraternità’), but instead Levi notes that ‘la Germania non era né morta né moribonda: già tre giorni dopo l’armistizio, il serpent verdegrigio delle divisioni naziste aveva invaso le strade di Milano e Torino.’<sup>690</sup> By contrast, an image of the haphazard and politically helpless Italian emerges from the essay, in which he notes that he and his fellow Jewish students were inept to deal with the reality of racial laws: ‘Alla luce del senno di poi, eravamo inconscienti, inetti e male informati: tale era, del resto, la enorme maggioranza degli Italiani.’<sup>691</sup>

Levi’s role as an Italian victim whose voice has been universalised as the authoritative and single most powerful source of consensus about the Holocaust can be argued to have contributed to the lack of self-reflection on behalf of Italian public and political discourse. In 1986, the publication of *I Sommersi e i salvati*, Primo Levi’s highly influential final volume of essays about his experience in Auschwitz and the ongoing significance of the Holocaust in contemporary Italy as well as Europe at large, provoked a series of debates surrounding one of the most provocative moral categories that Levi put forward in the essay ‘The Grey Zone’. Levi coined the concept of *la zona grigia* with reference to specific modalities of survival in his experience of Auschwitz in order to deplore the moral quagmire that the *univers concentrationnaire* represented which required a complicated balancing act between the avoidance of quick judgement of the agents involved, as well as the refusal of banal relativism (all were guilty of compromise, so none were especially guilty) or specious psychologism (we all contain within us phantasms of the persecutor and the persecuted).<sup>692</sup> Gordon’s reading of the moral delicacy and complicated philosophical nature of the essay concludes with how the concept of the ‘Grey Zone’ was quickly deformed and usurped in the public arena where it was misused to represent Italy’s unprocessed complicity with Fascism in terms of absolute moral

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<sup>689</sup> *Ibid.* p.1187.

<sup>690</sup> Primo Levi, ‘il faraone con la svastica’ in *Opere II*, pp.1190-1193, p.1191.

<sup>691</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1190.

<sup>692</sup> Gordon, 2012, p.142.



relativism. Yet, as Gordon demonstrates, the emergence of the influential concept of the *grey zone* which illuminated unmetabolised complicities with Fascism became an interpretive tool for Austrian politics in the first instance ‘before rebounding back to Italian complicities’, as the moral relativism it implied was first misappropriated in relation to the exploding Waldheim affair in 1986, which was to mark a radical shift in Austrian public discourse of Hitler’s First Victims to Hitler’s Willing Allies.<sup>693</sup> Primo Levi’s notion of the ‘grey zone’ became an interpretive strategy of the Waldheim Affair, the series of events and media exposures that showed that former secretary general of the UN and at the time presidential candidate Kurt Waldheim (1918-2007) had been involved in war crimes as part of the Nazi occupation of the Balkans. Thus, two events – one discursive: Levi’s elaboration of the ‘grey zone’ idea; one political: bringing one of Austria’s most senior politician’s instrumental role in atrocities in the former Yugoslavia to light – reverberating through and between Italy and Austria leading to a contemporaneous, transnational questioning and self-scrutiny as to the role of the past and its importance for the present. The implications of the Waldheim affair were crucial to Italy’s own self-examination, as Giorgio Bocca’s article in *La Stampa* makes clear: ‘Quanto alle rimozioni nostre, sono state talmente repentine e globali che non sembrano neppure rimozioni, [...] non ci si sente né il travaglio delle coscienze, né le imbarazze della memoria: ci si addormenta in camicia nera e ci si sveglia in camicia rossa.’<sup>694</sup> However, he uses Primo Levi’s idea of ‘le zone grigie’ to maintain that ‘good sense and equality’ (‘il buon senso e l’equità’) should prevail over archival evidence that would incriminate so many as to imperil ‘la sopravvivenza dei popoli’/‘the survival of the population’; thus, Bocca advises a practice ‘vergogna e ricordo’/‘shame and memory’ so that the ‘greyness’, the moral indeterminacy of the Fascist period can remain appreciated, but not tolerated.<sup>695</sup> Two days later, Garrone’s response denationalises the Waldheim debate and states the necessity of recognising ‘da europei, o meglio da uomini civili’ (‘as Europeans, or even as civilised human beings’), that every human being is a ‘grey’ mixture of good and bad, and that Waldheim’s election may lead to an improved awareness of the legacy of Fascism for Europe. He notes that ‘la questione trascende i confronti nazionali’/‘the question transcends national boundaries, which in my view obfuscates the need for a specific Italian engagement with the Holocaust.’<sup>696</sup> The Waldheim

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<sup>693</sup> *Ibid.* p.143.

<sup>694</sup> Giorgio Bocca, ‘La Via del Perdono passa per Vienna’, *La Stampa*, 12.6.1986. ‘When it comes to our repressions, they are so hastily and all-encompassingly accomplished, that they hardly seem to be repressions of anything at all. [...] One does not have a sense of consciences at work, nor of the strains of memory: we go to sleep in a black shirt, and wake up in a red one’

<sup>695</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>696</sup> Alessandro Galante Garrone, ‘Waldheim il grigio’, *La Stampa*, 14.06.1986.

affair was the death knell of the Austrian ‘Lebenslüge’ – that it had been Hitler’s first victim – and reactions to the scandal in Italy problematize the difficulties of squaring complicities and responsibilities with the redemptive story of victimhood. The complicated notion of the grey zone finds an echo in Levi’s ‘German stories’ where the manipulation of the human form by German scientific and politically-motivated endeavour results in the creation of victims and sufferers deprived of voice or human agency, narrated as they are by a third-party witness. Thus, Primo Levi’s voice as a witness and privileged mediator of ‘Holocaust talk’ acts as a catalyst for debates and examinations between Italy and Austria and questions the legacy of Fascism and Nazism as a national, European and ultimately human concern.

### **Concluding remarks**

As I see it, the notion of ‘creatureliness’ indicates a spectrum of physical disturbances that crystallizes both the author’s engagement with fascism on the one hand, and the legacy of post-war humanism on the other, thus shedding light on the intertwining of animality, culture and history. I hope to have shown that creatureliness can encompass both the exposure of the human to the violence of politics and history (symbolised by the traumatic act of binding in ‘Der Gefesselte’) and how this exposure necessarily entails a reflection on the boundary of animals and humans. The body, as the register for creaturely responses that transcend species boundaries, is according to Diane Davis, ‘the condition for your exposure, susceptibility, vulnerability, and therefore for your responsivity,’ making the creaturely bodies of Levi and Aichinger’s figures a persuasive index as to how an exposure to the violence of others is corporeally registered and responded to.<sup>697</sup> This accounts for the omnipresence of animals as a metaphorical mode of coming to terms with historical violence of the recent past in Austria and Italy, in order to understand how animals, creatures and a negotiation of the human animal boundary inflect an understanding of historical responsibility, victimhood and national identity in the works of Ilse Aichinger and Primo Levi. Levi and Aichinger’s stories represent the dehumanising and creaturely dimensions of trauma, and come to radically different conclusions: whereas for Aichinger, human embodiment can continue to survive and have meaning following an experience of violence; for Levi, violence and suffering can only entail the demolition of personhood to which no ethical value is attached whatsoever. The demolition of personhood and its posthuman embodiments, the issue of spectatorship and ‘spectacular

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<sup>697</sup> Diane Davis, ‘Creaturely Rhetorics’, *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 44.1 (2011), pp.88-94, p.90.

suffering' in Liliana Cavani's *il portiere di notte* and Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò* are the issues with which I end this thesis in the concluding chapter.

**Conclusion: ‘Another type of human’: Creatureliness, Compassion and National Identity in Film.**

*If a people goes through enough wars, pretty soon all that's left is the brute, the creature that we – you and I and others like us – have brought up from the slime.*<sup>698</sup>

*Wie habt ihr das überstehen können, ohne eine andere Gattung Mensch zu werden?*<sup>699</sup>

*Una piccolo cosa scura che non si muove. Potrebbe essere una macchia della muraglia, potrebbe essere un banale effetto ottico. Ma potrebbe anche essere una creatura umana: diseredata, sola e afflitta.*<sup>700</sup>

This thesis has mined the usefulness of the theoretical arsenal of the creaturely in an examination of the reverberations of the Second World War on the frameworks of humanity, historical agency and national identity. I now want to refine this by honing on two examples of how deeply the figure of the creature permeates engagements with the Second World War in Austrian and Italian culture, namely by exploring two films that the thesis did not leave time to explore, Liliana Cavani's *Il Portiere di Notte* (1974) and Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò* (1975). They are pertinent in that they offer an intermedial response to a trope which I have hitherto been exploring textually; as I have shown, the trope of the creaturely is contingent on narrators' choices of similes, metaphors and discursive associations with vocabularies relating to the animal, the body, the child, the monster. By drawing my attention to creatureliness in film, I am able to explore how the creaturely mobilises anxieties regarding the Nazi-Fascist past by drawing out how the body is subjected to power, and how the spectator is invited to respond to a figure on screen, whose humanity has been called into question due to his/her exposure to a systemic violence rooted in representations of recent history. The following short argument

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<sup>698</sup> John Williams, *Stoner* (London: Random House, 2012), pp.35-36.

<sup>699</sup> Mitgutsch, *Die Züchtigung*, p.54.

<sup>700</sup> Dino Buzzati, *In quel preciso momento* (Milan: Mondadori, 1963), p.109.

will demonstrate how the visual vocabulary of the creature mobilises the economy of capitalist consumption, and the dangers posed to what I consider to be the necessity of a simultaneously historically honest and compassionate approach.

### **The aesthetics of subjection**

Liliana Cavani's *Il Portiere di Notte* (1974, *The Night Porter*) and Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò* (1975) occupy an infamous place in the history of Italian cinema in that they stage how history is embodied by the simultaneously sexualized and dehumanized human figure. Cavani's film is set in post-war Vienna and 'brings to the surface a repressed "history"' according to the director, bringing Austria's disavowed complicity in Hitler's Third Reich to light.<sup>701</sup> Cavani's choice of Vienna is loaded in that it avoids any mention of Italian Fascism and the director goes so far as to represent Vienna as an interpretive key for the events of the twentieth century: 'Ho scelto Vienna perché adoro Vienna. Il tempo sembra ancora fermo alla prima guerra mondiale [...] Adoro Vienna perché lì ho capito alcune cose, alcuni segni dei nostri tempi che sono cominciati lì.'<sup>702</sup> Whereas Cavani's choice of location both universalises the significance of fascism ('alcuni segni dei nostri tempi') and obfuscates any Italian involvement in this historical moment, Pasolini's setting for his brutal metaphor of fascism – an ornate villa near Marzabotto – is an unmistakeable hint at the complexities of Italian participation in the Third Reich. From 29 September to 1 October 1944, Nazi troops murdered 779 Italian civilians as a reprisal against the partisan activities of the Communist group 'Stella Rossa' operating in the area. The massacre took place under the Repubblica di Salò, indicating how one portion of the Italian population actively supported the brutal violence perpetrated by the Nazis on Italian soil. Yet two other definitions of Italian national identity during World

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<sup>701</sup> Liliana Cavani cited by Saul Friedländer, *Reflections on Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*, tr. Thomas Weyr (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p.129.

<sup>702</sup> Liliana Cavani, *Il Portiere di Notte* (Torino: Einaudi, 1974), p.xiii.

War Two come to the fore through the Marzabotto setting: firstly, the brutality to which ‘ordinary’ civilians were subjugated upholds the validity of an Italian narrative of victimhood; secondly, the reprisal against civilians for Communist activities hints at the resentment towards Resistance fighters which only further complicates the heroic myth of the Italian war of liberation. Hence, both *Salò* and *The Night Porter* engage discourses of national identity through the spectacle of the abused body by portraying figures engaging with historically loaded and explicitly signposted national locations. For both directors, the body is a site of cultural, social and aesthetic investment, and *Salò* and *The Night Porter* both thematize the violence of fascism as inherent to the dominant humanist artistic practices of Western Europe (including opera, art, ballet, and literature) which stage the body as an object of consumption.<sup>703</sup>

In *The Night Porter*, Lucia, a concentration camp inmate, is reunited in post-war Vienna with her former lover and tormentor, the Sturmbahnführer Max. The film relies on architecture, embodiment and sensuality to retrace the repressed history of Austria’s involvement in the Holocaust. In *Salò*, Pasolini depicts a catastrophic, even apocalyptic, undoing of the joyful optimism for the body he portrayed in his cinematic *Trilogia di Vita* (1971-1974). Scenes of torture, rape, and coprophagia feature in *Salò*’s dramatization of Italy’s double capitulation: first, to historical Fascism, emblemized in Pasolini’s setting of Marzabotto for the opening sequences of *Salò*, and second, to what Pasolini called the “new,” “structural” fascism of postwar neo-capitalism. In this way, the director is confronting the viewer as a historical subject with her position in this visual economy. Through a combination of the historical legacy of Italian Fascism and the “new” fascism of consumer capitalism, Pasolini claimed that humanity was entering a new era whose manifestations were primarily traceable at a bodily level. In his ‘Abiura della Trilogia di Vita’, Pasolini notes – in a statement that could also apply to *The*

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<sup>703</sup> Here I agree with Margaret Atwood’s definition of traditional Western humanist culture in which the dignity of the human being is guaranteed in artistic practices: ‘What man wrote [...] was self-expression – the expression of the self, of a man’s whole being’ in *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.52.

*Night Porter* - that this nefarious combination has meant that ‘anche la realtà dei corpi innocenti è stata violata, manipolata, manomessa dal potere consumistico: anzi, tale violenza sui corpi è diventato il dato più macroscopico *nuova epoca umana*.’<sup>704</sup> Pasolini’s anxiety about a ‘new human era’ in which bodies cannot be disentangled from their historical and economic conditioning makes the necessity of engaging with corporeality in an examination of post-war national identity all the more valid. The co-option of Pasolini and Cavani’s screen bodies into economic and political power structures rooted in the historical phenomenon of Fascism pose important questions about the link between the commodification of the body and the possibility of authentic emotional engagement with its suffering. This was also evident in my first chapter where displays of ‘spectacular suffering’ actually had measurable economic gains in Levi and Bernhard’s depictions of wartime and post-war degradation, underscoring the economically lucrative as well as emotionally redemptive value of suffering. Here though, Agamben and Morante’s redemptive and innocent creatures have been corrupted by entropic historical and economic pressures, matching my argument in chapter two about the impossibility of a redemptive and thereby instrumentalised view of brutalisation given the ineluctability of the real historical circumstances they reflect. Here the creature veers toward the grotesque notion of creation or production within networks of power and consumerism. I suggest that Pasolini and Cavani sketch how the suffering body’s ability to invite compassion is compromised by the consumerist economy – an exchange of images and visual pleasures at the expense of a commodified human being – affecting modes of embodiment and the response to suffering in Italian cinema after 1945.

Both films expose the problematic nature of staging the suffering of others by turning violence into a spectacle – a tendency in modern cultural production rooted in ‘die Ästhetisierung der Politik, welche der Faschismus betreibt’, that Benjamin had already

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<sup>704</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Lettere luterane* (Turin: Einaudi, 1976), pp.71-72. Emphasis mine.

deplored half a century before and which was evident in chapter three where the experience of subjection and violence was automatically, though not justifiably, anchored in the Fascist past:

Die Menschheit, die einst bei Homer ein Schauobjekt für die olympischen Götter war, ist es nun für sich selbst geworden. Ihre Selbstentfremdung hat jenen Grad erreicht, der sie ihre eigene Vernichtung als Genuß ersten Ranges erleben lässt.<sup>705</sup>

A significant scene of *Il portiere di notte* is set in the darkened Vienna opera house where the protagonists watch a scene from Mozart's *Magic Flute*, an opera describing the pleasures of married life. Max and Lucia exchange glances, each look followed by an image of their relationship in the concentration camp. The reverse angle shots jump between Pamina's light melodies on married life and scenes of a sadistic and sexual nature from the Camps; violent sexuality and Nazi symbolism intertwine to provide a continuity of sexual consumption within dominant cultural norms and the fascist economy of power. Thus, this episode shows the highly problematic status of humanist culture that is literally in bed with a contaminated historical legacy in Austria and Italy and the consumerist economy that it both represents and sustains.

Max and Lucia's visions of the camp of brutality rely on what has become a standard iconography of the Holocaust. The inmates' striped pajamas, the SS guards' black leather gloves and uniforms, the showy SS banners are well-known features of material archiving the Holocaust. Yet these stock images have been superimposed with another visual vocabulary, namely one sexualising and glorifying the degradation of victims featured in the 'Nazisploitation' genre of pornographic cinema popularised in the late 1960s and 1970s. As Susan Sontag muses in her 1975 essay 'Fascinating Fascism' which traces the reverberations

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<sup>705</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit' in *Drei Studien zur Kunstsoziologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1963), pp.7-44, p.40; 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Illuminations*, tr. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 2009), pp.211-244, p.235: 'Mankind which in Homer's time was an object for contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one in itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.'



of fascism in post-war culture due to its focus on ‘life as art, and the cult of beauty’: ‘the colour is black, the material is leather, the seduction is beauty, the justification is honesty, the aim is ecstasy, the fantasy is death’;<sup>706</sup> the reductionist visual stylization and consequent eroticisation of the Holocaust in *The Night Porter* encourage ‘the spectator to reject the significance of the Nazi context to focus instead on the erotic content of the film,’ as I have argued elsewhere.<sup>707</sup> Here, the setting of the Lager is unarguably kitsch in the sense proposed by Tomas Kúlka: ‘kitsch does not appeal to individual idiosyncracies [...] since its purpose is to please the greatest number of people, it always plays on the most common denominators.’<sup>708</sup> The heavily stylized ‘Holocaust’ scenes invite the audience to delight in their capacity to be moved while indulging in the visual pleasure of familiar images that conform to notions of ‘what it was like’ in the concentration camps. Kúlka borrows Milan Kundera’s definition of kitsch emotion to elucidate this: ‘Kitsch causes two tears [...] the second tear says, how nice to be moved, together with all of mankind.’<sup>709</sup> Thus, Cavani problematizes the ways in which compassion regarding the suffering body is commodified as an instrument of pleasure through the self-conscious deployment of kitsch images of the Holocaust belonging to a consumable cultural economy. In *The Night Porter* human vulnerability is absorbed into a logic of capitalism, voyeurism and exchange as a result of the deployment of images satisfying the desire for consumption and pleasure. The very processes of making art forms that places the body at centre stage inevitably overwrite the autonomy of that body, which becomes circumscribed by cultural, economic and historical discourses, affecting the position of the viewer/reader which was evident throughout my thesis and to which Cavani’s film adds a powerful visual support.

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<sup>706</sup> Susan Sontag, ‘Fascinating Fascism’ in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002), pp.73-108, p.103.

<sup>707</sup> Alexandra Hills, ‘Viennese Fantasies, Austrian Histories: Space, Fantasy and Fascism in Ingeborg Bachmann’s *Malina* and Liliana Cavani’s *The Night Porter*’ in *Fear and Fantasy in a Global World*, ed. by Susana Araújo, Marta Pacheco Pinto and Sandra Bettencourt (Boston: Brill, 2015), pp.185-212, p.208.

<sup>708</sup> Tomas Kúlka, *Kitsch and Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), p.27.

<sup>709</sup> *Ibid.*

### **The troubling spectacle of suffering**

In *Salò*, human vulnerability is co-opted into the libertine's regulated system of exploitation and consumption which overrides any affective humanist responses to the suffering body: a suffering body must be enjoyed, not mourned. Pasolini's film emphasizes the nexus of victimhood and sexual pleasure by staging beautiful, classically proportioned bodies chosen by the libertines for their perfection (for instance, one girl is rejected due to a blackened tooth). Furthermore, Pasolini's adaptation of Sade's hyper-violent novel *The 120 Days of Sodom* (1785) into a Fascist-era context underscores his condemnation of the complicity between humanist culture and dehumanizing violence. *Salò* shows how the lust for the spectacle of violence is embedded within European culture, at the same time that it highlights Pasolini's own position within that very culture. In *Salò*, the body is a rigid self-referential image, a cultural product. One need only think of the symmetry and coldness of the architecture matching that of pale, well-proportioned eight male and eight female victims obeying the libertines' desires. The libertines in Pasolini's view create a new type of civilisation in which the body is consumed as an image resulting in its derealisation.<sup>710</sup> The human body of *Salò* is the interface upon which various modes of signification and exploitation have inscribed themselves, a mere virtual surface. As Ravetto notes, Pasolini's obsession with cultural 'layering' (*Salò* refers to Dante, Sade, Klossowski, Nietzsche, to cite but a few) 'culminates in the disappearance of notions of depth.'<sup>711</sup> Suffering and eroticism are removed from the realm of affect to that of the familiar, reproduced image in *Salò*, as for instance when the young victim Renata's suffering at the death of her mother is displayed to the libertines as she sobs beneath a painting of Maria, *mater dolorosa*. Her suffering is reduced to quotation, and thus emptied of emotional impact. Vulnerability and bodily exposure are incitements to subjection in *Salò*,

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<sup>710</sup>See Pier Paolo Pasolini, 'Tetis' in *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Contemporary Perspectives*, tr. Patrick Rumble, ed. by Patrick Rumble and Bart Testa (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1994), pp.243-249, p.246.

<sup>711</sup> Kriss Ravetto, *The Unmaking of Fascist Aesthetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p.128.

rather than calls to compassion. In *Salò* and *The Night Porter*, a redeeming perspective becomes impossible as all modes of signification are inscribed into the heavily referential representational economy. In other words, the suffering body is appropriated by the system that causes its degradation; its potential to incite an affective response is erased due to its reduction to a knot of economic, cultural and political influences. In my fourth chapter Levi's German stories alerted the reader to precisely such barriers to empathy with material vulnerability and Aichinger's testimonial literature, by acceding ever more rarified and symbolic levels of linguistic metaphor cautioned the reader to be aware of his position within a contaminated discursive and historical legacy.

### **Creatures of violence**

In their films Pasolini and Cavani present us with the creaturely manifestation of the body in the throes of subjection to a political, economic and representational power over which it has no control. The libertine Blangis even addresses the young prisoners as 'creature' before reading them 'le regole che governeranno la vostra vita' signifying their submission to the will and rules of others: 'debole creature incatenate, destinate al nostro piacere, spero che non vi siete delusi che troverete qui la libertà ridicola concessa dal mondo esteriore.'

For instance, while Renata sobs due to the death of her mother, she is petted and given food by the Duc, a situation which mirrors Signora Vaccari's story of sharing food with her tormentor's dogs. Renata's bodily convulsions are not responded to with any kind of humane attention or care, rather she is treated like an animal. The victims of sexual violence are most often portrayed crouching or sitting down (in one scene they kneel in a vat of excrement) and in one striking scene, they are leashed up and forced to walk about on all fours like dogs suggesting the dehumanising effect of being subjected to the will of others. Thus, the victims themselves are complicit in this system of consumption and repetition, which forecloses the possibility of feeling compassion. In *Salò*, the lack of psychological depth accorded to the

victims encourages the viewer to objectify them, and consequently, as Greene writes, ‘unable to feel for the victims as fellow human beings, we become uneasy, unsure about the extent of our own humanness.’<sup>712</sup> Pasolini’s long, barely edited takes also plunge the spectator into a deeply uncomfortable, relentless visual onslaught, that disengage the empathy of the spectator.

The cringed postures and animalistic behavior destabilises how the spectator relates to them, a referential instability Gordon and Benvegnù have called ‘the possibly-not-quite-human.’<sup>713</sup> The tormentors do not relate to the young people’s suffering, which disables an affective engagement with them on behalf of the spectator. As the stability of both categories – human and animal – are destabilized, throwing a challenge to centuries’ worth of humanistic cultural traditions, the spectator is discomfited in his own ontological position which I discussed in relation to the troubling influence of maternal generation on the autonomy of the body in my chapter on Anna Mitgutsch’s *Die Züchtigung*.

*The Night Porter* further thematises the creaturely in-betweenness provoked by the traumatic exposure to a violence rooted in the legacy of persecution of Jews under the Third Reich. Like predators honing in on their prey, the gang of ex-Nazis stalks Lucia and Max as the couple begins to starve in Max’s apartment until they are forced to surrender by leaving the flat. Their relationship to the tight, confined space of the apartment which provides safety from external predators underscores their physical dehumanization as the apartment becomes a sort of den: both an animal dwelling-place and a place of refuge which buffers the couple. In their exploration of dens and nests, Paul Farley and Michael Symmons ascertain that ‘there is always an element of danger as if the nest-like space is all the more secure for having some darkness and threat it needs to keep out.’<sup>714</sup> Once they move into the apartment, Max and Lucia almost

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<sup>712</sup> Greene, p.119.

<sup>713</sup> Gordon and Benvegnù, 2014.

<sup>714</sup> Paul Farley and Michael Symmons, *Edgelands* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), p.42. Gaetana Marrone reveals that the apartment was reconstructed in Rome’s Cinecittà studios with mobile walls to enhance the enclosure of the protagonists under siege. Gaetana Marrone, *The Gaze and the Labyrinth: The Cinema of Liliana Cavani* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p.82.

stop speaking altogether and their movements revolve around making love, touching each other, fighting physically for food or sexual dominance, crouching and crawling under tables. As food becomes scarcer, they break a jam jar and cut their mouths, tongues, and faces trying to lick its contents. Furthermore, when Max leaves the apartment in search of food, he chains Lucia to the bed; from then on, until the final scene on the bridge, we do not see Lucia without her chain, which animalizes her further. As their bodies become more and more crouched from hunger, confinement, and pain, Lucia's victimhood as a Jewish victim and Max's perpetrator status as an ex-Nazi seem to have no relevance as the spectator is confronted with a dehumanised couple of bodies. Rather, the experience of oppression and violence under totalitarianism which Max and Lucia are enacting involve what Agamben has called their 'nuda vita' (bare life) 'which collapses the biological and the political.'<sup>715</sup> Max and Lucia give up their individual historical identities in their animalistic sado-masochistic confinement, and when they are eventually shot upon leaving the apartment, the camera supervises their demise via a long tracking shot which makes the spectator occupy the unstable position of pursuer and pursued. As Marguerite Waller notes 'the camera's restless comparison of every position to every other is among the film's most powerful and most disturbing strategies.'<sup>716</sup> The way the spectator is forced to watch the torment of the 'possible-not-quite-human' victims in both films suggests an unconscious complicity in the actions taken against the characters on screen.<sup>717</sup> Thus, the directors suggest the viewer's implication in the societal processes which trouble an affective response to the suffering human body: we become 'creatures' of the camera. This necessitates an ethically engaged and historically attuned reader/spectator who can monitor how her subject position and emotional orientation is being contorted by editorial choices.

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<sup>715</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p.46.

<sup>716</sup> Waller, p.216.

<sup>717</sup> Millicent Marcus identifies this uncomfortable complicity underscored in *The Night Porter* 'in the malevolent activities of the ex-Nazi officers who seek to exorcise the couple's threat to their post-war normalization we cannot help but recognize our own complicity,' p.55.

Though as conditioned political and material subjects it will not always be possible to negate the ways in which cultural products politically and affectively position us, such an analysis of how the trope of the creaturely appeals to notions of complicit passivity or passive victimhood enables us to be alert to such positioning devices.

In Cavani's and Pasolini's worlds, the possibility of resistance or dissent is foreclosed, and any hope for historical change disabled; the creaturely, subjected bodies undermine the possibility of historical agency and intervention. Destructive and inhuman modes of vision as well as the pervasiveness of the Nazi past ossify the body and de-activate any kind of compassionate response in post-war European culture.

Thus, the films end with a disturbing interrogation of the conditions of post-war spectatorship which enable us to challenge the scopic relations upon which humanism and ethics are based. After collecting material for her first documentary about the history of the Third Reich aired on RAI Television in 1961 and 1962, Cavani stated in an interview how the archival footage revealed a disturbing thirst for images that challenged the limits of spectators' experiences:

The Germans loved to record every event on film, and they did it well. My editor and I saw rolls upon rolls on the *Lager* and the Russian campaign. [...] Clearly there has been a progress in cruelty, a true escalation. For whom did those cameramen think they were leaving these images? For monsters?<sup>718</sup>

Nevertheless, it is possible to see in Cavani and Pasolini's representation of the politically and culturally exposed body as a dramatization of the gap between the reality of wartime (and particularly concentration camp) experience and its representation Primo Levi invokes in *I sommersi e i salvati*. In Levi's view 'essa, fatalmente, slitta verso la semplificazione e lo stereotipo; vorrei porre qui un argine contro questa deriva.'<sup>719</sup> Rather

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<sup>718</sup> Cited by Marrone, p.181.

<sup>719</sup> Primo Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati*, p.128.

than foreclosing an ethical and affective response from the viewer, these non-relatable and stultified bodies problematize the troubling tendency to identify with the victims of history, in what Gordon calls ‘a prevent[ion] of this over-comprehensive identification on epistemological groups ([...] any identification is an illusion) and on ethical grounds ([...] the illusion that such an identification creates is possibly pernicious).’<sup>720</sup> On the one hand, these cinematic examples of creaturely embodiments in the representation of the Second World War show a problematic disconnection of suffering and compassion, linked to the collusion of aesthetics with consumerist cultural and political economies. On the other, Cavani and Pasolini’s affectless representation of bodily suffering in which the spectator is alienated from those suffering due to unstable camera positions and long takes of framing shots disables the troubling tendency to identify with the victim.

*Salò* and *Il portiere di notte*’s spectator is thereby forced to interrogate her position in a visual culture that capitalizes on the suffering of others. Thus, these works showcase the potential of film to reflect upon the complicity of the trope of the creaturely with prevailing national narratives of victimhood. Nevertheless, the ineluctable visual presence of a human, albeit degraded body, and the problematic dynamic of pleasure and disgust at its subjection provokes in the spectator is an obstacle to the ethical and epistemological demands the historical subject matter should command. While texts have provided the major support for the thesis the visual examples I have explored here and in my discussion of Moore in chapter two have highlighted the productive framework of the creaturely in an elaboration of the aftermath of a violent historical legacy by imagining how the plasticity and materiality of the body can be manipulated to reflect on its own abasement and underline all the more urgently the need for the viewer to be aware of how his subject position and affective orientation are being mobilized. Whereas literature and language offer the semantic nuance to destabilize the reading

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<sup>720</sup> Gordon and Benvegnù, 2014.

subject, film and visual art do not offer the same mediation, such is the immediacy of the suffering body.

### **The international legacy of the collapse of creatureliness and victimhood**

Nearly seven decades after 1945, the inescapability of the engagement with the creaturely incarnations of the Holocaust victim on an international scale is nowhere more clearly evinced than in Shalom Auslander's 2011 *Hope: A Tragedy*. Set in a suburban American town in the late noughties, Kugel, an anxious New York Jew discovers the survivor Anne Frank living in his attic. Constantly rewriting her interminable memoirs, while surrounded by her own faeces she is a symbol of the collapse of the ethical fascination of the concentration camp inmate or survivor as a privileged victim of our time; Anne 'very much awake, very grotesque' has become an irritant, an absurd and incomprehensible anachronism in modern Jewish life. Anne Frank – no longer the smiling tragic child protagonist - provokes a visceral, pathological anxiety in the nervous Jewish protagonist due to her grotesque, creaturely appearance: 'the numbers [on her arm] meant that Anne Frank or not, consumed by madness or not, half-dead or not, rotting like a corpse or not, the old woman was a god-damned Holocaust survivor. Which was a problem.'<sup>721</sup> Auslander's satiric portrayal of Holocaust fatigue in the American-Jewish community figures the body at centre stage; Kugel's mother, despite being born in America, self-identifies as a victim acting out her 'not-traumatic-enough-stress-disorder', 'Mother below, moaning, groaning, belching; Anne Frank above, tapping, shuffling, wheezing, typing, printing, bitching; and Kugel, trapped in the middle of this miserable suffer sandwich, with all the wretched clangor of their failing mortal coils.'<sup>722</sup> Kugel, too, defines his entire existence a loser because that he would never have survived Auschwitz due to his chronic bowel complaints ('the creature in his gut') linked to a gluten allergy possibly caused by his

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<sup>721</sup> Shalom Auslander, *Hope: A Tragedy* (London: Picador, 2012), p.29, 220.

<sup>722</sup> *Ibid.*, p.173.



mother's compulsive behaviour, force-feeding him bread 'ever since reading that this was common behaviour among survivors of the Holocaust.'<sup>723</sup> Once again, the narrative of victimhood is related to consumption, which in *Ausländer's* text reverts into a pathological self-consumption. He despairs 'I would never make it in Auschwitz [...] not a week. Not a day. Bread was all they ate there, wasn't it? [...] Solomon Kugel would die in the latrine. Doubled over the on the crapper, dead of dehydration. Dead of gluten. Dead of the shits.'<sup>724</sup> *Auslander's* novel eviscerates the seduction of victimhood and asks how the history of Jewish suffering can be reckoned with productively rather than at the entropic level of creaturely embodiment. Yet, *Auslander's* conclusion that 'Heaven is a place with no memory, no history, no past'<sup>725</sup> is unsatisfying in that it ignores the real issue that disturbing, embodied legacies of a traumatic and discomfiting past pose for an elaboration of national identity, in countries like Austria and Italy, where the implications of the past have the potential to cement or destroy the integrity of the nation. The examination of the trope of the creature illuminates how attitudes to the body, agency and national identity are worked out in literary texts in such a way that narratives surrounding the past can be accommodated in all their complexity, remaining mindful of the need for historical accuracy without the denial of real past suffering.

### **Thesis and chapter review**

The creature has proven to be an inexhaustible theoretical approach in the study of the reverberations of the Second World War and the Holocaust in works by Italian and Austrian writers. The Austrian 'Lebenslüge' – as 'Hitler's First Victim' – and Italy's whitewashing of its *brava gente's* participation in one of the most brutal regimes of recent history is articulated and problematized via an interrogation of the status of the creature. The creature polarises the

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<sup>723</sup>*Ibid.*, p.91,136.

<sup>724</sup>*Ibid.*, p.91.

<sup>725</sup>*Ibid.*, p.195.

anxieties, aspirations, disavowals and desires about the violent past in two nations coming to terms with devastating historical legacies of complicity with violent totalitarian regimes, genocidal practices of exclusion and the subsequent entrenchment of indispensable myths to allow the integrity of the nation to survive. In this way, the figure of the creature in the works explored atomises any monolithic notions of ‘collective memory’ by enabling the representation of multivalent experiences of and confrontations with Second World War. As Konrad Liesmann remarks, the collective ‘victimhood myth’ or its denial ‘schafft Eindeutigkeit dort, wo die Geschichte selbst uneindeutig war’, hence the creature’s usefulness for accommodating the complexity of post-war subjectivity and agency in Italy and Austria after 1945.<sup>726</sup> As we have seen, this trope is polarised: it signifies on the one hand redemptive disempowerment, subjection to biopolitical systemic violence, exposed and vulnerable physicality. On the other, the creature has surfaced as an irritant, threatening social bonds, menacing the integrity of communities, casting doubt on the validity of humanity, once redemptive, now suspect explicative paradigm. Creatureliness has at times been invested with a moral agency that does not match its inability to engage with and disentangle the traumatising reverberations of historical experiences of violence in the context of the Second World War. At others, the figure of the creature has revealed problematic investments with exclusionary practices seeking to demarcate self from other. The visceral revulsion the disempowered body provokes, the recurrence of discriminatory mentalities the dehumanised other unleashes and the assertion of power that the subjection of the vulnerable creature invites underline the urgency of theorising how the dynamic of victimhood and creatureliness have shaped reflections about recent history in Austria and Italy.

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<sup>726</sup> Konrad Paul Liesmann, *Der Standard*, 30 April/ 1 May 2005: ‘creates clarity in the places where history itself was unclear.’

The theoretical framework of the creaturely has been a helpful way of tracing intellectual and affective reverberations of the Second World War at the level of the victimised body. A resistance or attachment to this hegemonic narrative emerges through the plurality of creaturely incarnations which evoke attitudes to passivity, subjection and individual and collective agency.

In chapter one, I examined the international prestige of the insistence on creatureliness in Carlo Levi's *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* and Thomas Bernhard's *Frost*. In these two novels, historical consciousness is portrayed as being unavailable to those economically and politically marginalised from the centres of power, making them unknowing victims of an oppressive and hegemonic view of history. Furthermore, I showed how the creaturely spectacle of suffering redeemed contaminated and problematic historical legacies of fascism to real economic effect demonstrating the political expedience of such a myth and its embodied representations.

The second chapter led me to consider Morante's mobilisation of specific categories of victims, namely animals, children and women. This enabled me to question how Morante's redemptive, messianic vision of creatureliness portrayed a simplified engagement with the history of the Second World War as one of universal victimisation. Here, an examination of *La Storia*'s makeshift habitats, and temporary shelters linked the fragile embodiment of the wartime victim to the disintegrating fabric of the Italian city in the Second World War.

In chapter three, I evaluated the importance of generation as a modality of creation and how the orality and the maternal body enabled the embodied transmission of violent historical legacies in Anna Mitgutsch's *Die Züchtigung* and Elisabeth Reichart's *Februarschatten*. This chapter stressed the role of the reader in his duty of care to the multivalent subjectivities occupied by the narrator: though the appeal of victimhood as a redemptive personal myth is often grounded on real personal suffering in these stories of Austrian post-war torment, the

reader is left with the task of marrying ethics and epistemology by holding juxtaposed and often contradictory identities in the balance.

Finally, I examined the value of the trope of the creaturely for the testimonial literature of Primo Levi and Ilse Aichinger as the vindication of a hybrid embodiment debunking exclusionary and othering practices, while retaining the value of humanity as a conceptual category in the evaluation of legacies of persecution and genocide.

Overall, in their evaluation of experiences of historical violence, the authors of the works under discussion always drew on the language of embodiment; this mobilised the vocabulary of the animal from which an understanding of creatureliness as a privileged trope to measure investments in and anxieties about historical legacies, the appeal of victimhood and the anxiety of complicity with Fascism in Italy or Nazism in Austria emerges.

### **Vulnerability without creatureliness: Future perspectives and final remarks**

To round off this study, I propose three examples that portray the continued theoretical value of the framework of creatureliness after 1945. These configure how one may look beyond the disempowerment of the creature by affirming a vulnerability able to inscribe itself into a globalised quest for justice and political participation beyond the passivity of victimhood, what Lacapra calls ‘an affirmed vulnerability that does not exclude agency.’<sup>727</sup>

In 1982, Levi’s *Se non ora quando* moves beyond the reconciliation of the victim and the creature, recovering a sense of empowerment for the persecuted who were not longer dehumanised and bestialised by virtue of their historical circumstances. Narrated by Jewish partisans fighting the Nazis in Belarus, the following disconnects the experience of victimhood from its creaturely connotations. The partisans reject their identification with the animal

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<sup>727</sup> LaCapra, *History and Its Limits*, p. 199.

thereby refusing the creaturely as an interpretive paradigm for the experience of persecution and discrimination. Far from being dehumanising, the legacy of persecution now only serves to strengthen political participation and ethical awareness:

Voi siete ebrei [...] ma come ci hai riconosciuti?

-Dagli occhi, disse il sindaco – C'erano ebrei anche qui fra noi, e avevano gli occhi come i vostri.

-Come sono i nostri occhi? – chiese Mendel.

-Inquieti. Come quelle delle bestie insegue.

-Noi non siamo più bestie insegue, - disse Line. Molti dei nostri sono morti combattendo. I nostri nemici sono i vostri, quelli che hanno distrutto le vostre case.<sup>728</sup>

This quotation challenges the juxtaposition of the experience of persecution as one of automatic victimhood, codified as a creaturely analogy with the animal. A female partisan is given a voice to refuse her creaturely categorisation as a manic, melancholy, disempowered animal allowing her to self-identify as an active political subject instead.

Robert Menasse's 2008 short story 'Das Ende des Hungerwinters' is steeped in the humour of Holocaust-fatigue that we saw Shalom Auslander's *Hope: A Tragedy* but is all the more provocative due to its Austrian setting and audience. Here, Menasse combines parodying of dehumanising narrative tropes to convey the experience of Holocaust with the resignation accompanying the abandon of agency that the trope of the creaturely seems to incur. The narrator is the son of a Holocaust survivor who states parodically that he is glad he never had to experience anything due to the overwhelming weight of his own family's history: 'ich selbst habe keine anderen Erinnerungen als die des Vaters und der Großeltern – nach ihren Erfahrungen und Erzählungen hatte alles, was ich selbst erlebte, nie eine bleibende Bedeutung haben können.'<sup>729</sup> The young narrator is part of a second, post-war generation, who perceive their own lack of trauma ironically as an experiential lack: 'immer bin ich ermahnt worden,

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<sup>728</sup> Primo Levi, *Se non ora, quando?* (Torino: Einaudi, 1982), p.153.

<sup>729</sup> Robert Menasse, 'Das Ende des Hungerwinters' in *Ich kann jeder sagen: Erzählungen vom Ende der Nachkriegsordnung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009), pp.24-45, p.24: 'I myself have no memories other than those of my father and grandparents – after their experiences and stories, everything that I could have experienced myself, could never have had any lasting meaning.'

dankbar dafür zu sein, dass ich in meinem nachgeborenen Leben nicht hatte erleben müssen.’<sup>730</sup>

At a family gathering the narrator’s father tells the group the familiar story of his own experience during the Holocaust: the narrator’s mother and father had had to survive the war by hiding in the chimpanzee enclosure of Amsterdam zoo throughout the war. Thus, the family were forced to comply with the dehumanising racial laws by hiding the enclosure, which made them into zoo creatures themselves. The father tells the story and his wife immediately begins to imitate the noise of the creature: ‘Meine Mutter setzte sich auf und imitierte die Laute des Affens, ich stimmte sofort ein.’<sup>731</sup> The historical experience of persecution has been desublimated to one of zoo-like grotesqueness: ‘Es war komisch, es war lächerlich, aber keiner lachte.’<sup>732</sup> What Schoonover called the ‘spectacular suffering’ of history’s victims or the pious notion of the vulnerable creature is no longer a sign of moral value, of sublime victimhood and ethical insight, but is rather stigmatising, embarrassing, uncomfortable, far from a mark of cultural innocence and prestige. The son remarks that his father was still the same ape that he was when the Nazis turned him into one, and reproaches him for his indulgence in his tale of dehumanisation and victimhood: ‘Im Grund war er eine Affe. Geblieben. [...] Wieso liebte er es so, ein Affe zu sein und durch die unsichtbaren Gitterstäbe, die ihn von den Menschen mit normalen Biographien trennten, angegafft zu werden?’<sup>733</sup>

In today’s context of an Italy under the growing pressure of migration, Cristina de Caldas Brito in her *io, polpastrello 5.423* (I, finger print 5,423) portrays the atomised body of the immigrant in Italy during the incumbency of the Bossi-Fini law, which required all immigrants to Italy to register with the local police station to be finger printed.<sup>734</sup> To demonstrate her

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<sup>730</sup>*Ibid.* ‘I was always being reminded to be thankful for the fact that in my life as ‘someone born afterwards’ I would never have had to experience anything at all.’

<sup>731</sup>*Ibid.*, p.27. ‘My mother started it off by imitating the noise of the monkey, and I immediately chimed in.’

<sup>732</sup>*Ibid.* ‘It was weird, it was laughable, but no one laughed.’

<sup>733</sup>*Ibid.*, p.28. ‘At the end of the day he was an ape. Remained an ape. [...] Why did he love being an ape and being stared at through invisible bars which separated him from those with normal life stories?’

<sup>734</sup> Cristina de Caldas Brito, *io polpastrello 5243*. Full text available at: <http://ww3.comune.fe.it/vocidalsilenzio/polpastrello1.htm>. Last Accessed: 10 July 2013. For more on the Bossi-

willingness to adhere to the laws of her destination country, the protagonist, described only as a fingerprint, presents herself at the police station in the infernal summer heat, finding that other migrants have taken the same decision, namely to make an active gesture to integrate and be perceived as law abiding. In a queue of six-thousand, fingerprint 5423 notes the brutality and dehumanisation the ‘fingerprints’ are subjected to. A policeman shouts at one who has come too close ‘via, animale, via!’ and physically assaults the man out of fear and frustration. Yet, despite the experience of administrative dehumanisation and humiliation, the migrants of Rome are unified in their belief that they can make a positive difference to their destination country, as opposed to the parasitic, idle and violent policemen: ‘Il polpastrello 3986, il mio connazionale, mi affrettò: “Dai, corriamo, senza di noi, l'Italia si ferma!”’ Their willing registration with the Roman police undermines the existence of the discriminatory law, showing the immigrants to be more law-abiding and civilised than the police force who dehumanise and abject them. The institutional dehumanisation of the ‘fingerprints’ does not prevent them from achieving a solidary and effective intervention in Italian society: ‘pront[i] a prendere una decisione comune. In mezzo alle discussioni, cominciammo a capire che l'unione era la forza dei polpastrelli.’ They demonstrate that a creaturely embodiment – one defined by biopolitical exposure on the grounds of race and body – is no longer as shattering an experience, though it still undergoes the atomising force of political and institutional power, enabling an affirmative ground for political participation and solidarity.

These three narratives rooted in three different experiences of the vulnerability and exposure immanent to the condition of victimhood and susceptible to arouse traumatic symptoms – persecution, the generational transmission of narratives of imprisonment and

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Fini law, see Russell King and Nicola Mai, *Out of Albania: From Crisis Migration to Social Inclusion in Italy* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2008), pp.153-166.

displacement, and the alienation of migrants in modern day Italy –, now take opposite courses to the disempowering and compulsive representations we have encountered in the thesis.

In Austria and Italy, the vicissitudes of recent history and the irreconcilability of different historical narratives remain a problem. In 1996, Luciano Violante's inaugural speech as the Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies reminds us of the urgency of assessing claims to victimhood within their historical contexts:

occorre sforzarsi di capire, senza revisionismi falsificanti, i motivi per i quali migliaia di ragazzi e soprattutto di ragazze, quando tutto era perduto, si schierarono dalla parte di Salò e non dalla parte dei diritti e delle libertà.<sup>735</sup>

In Austria, as recently as 2013, an article in the Austrian national newspaper has criticised the state's limp approach to a head-on confrontation with its perpetrators, despite the foundation of the 'Arbeitsgruppe zur Ausforschung mutmaßlicher NS-Täter' ('working group to seek out suspected National Socialist perpetrators') in 2010:

Es ist höchst an der Zeit und von großer Bedeutung, dass dort, wo es noch möglich ist, der Rechtsstaat alle ihm zur Verfügung stehenden Mittel und Möglichkeiten nutzt, um dem Recht zum Durchbruch zu verhelfen.<sup>736</sup>

However, Austrian journalist Konrad Liesmann remains sceptical about the potential of the past to inform the future, when he opines that the will to power and the disregard for the vulnerability of others will always impair such noble historical objectives:

Da Menschen daran [an Gattungsmord] weder durch Aufklärung oder Bildung gehindert werden können, müsste alles daran gesetzt werden, dass wir die strukturellen Rahmenbedingungen unseres Lebens derartig ändern, dass weder Auschwitz noch Hiroshima, weder der Gulag noch die ökologische

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<sup>735</sup> <http://storia.camera.it/presidenti/violante-luciano/xiii-legislatura-della-repubblica-italiana/discorso:0#nav>. Last accessed: 8 August 2015.

<sup>736</sup> Beatrix Karl, *Die Presse*, 27.12.2013: 'It is high time and of paramount importance that the state use all the means and possibilities at its disposal, where possible to enable justice to emerge.'



Verwüstung eine prinzipielle Chance haben dürften. Dazu aber, dann steht zu befürchten, sind wir weder fähig noch willens.<sup>737</sup>

Yet the three examples of an affirmation of vulnerability which still paves the way for positive action within history enable us to envisage how identity-founding myths of victimhood may be refigured toward more future-oriented and productive avenues. In the context of Austrian and Italian post-war literature, debunking the automatic nexus of creatureliness and victimhood empowers the reader to remain mindful of her own embodiment and ethical position in the evaluation of post-war identity and epistemology. Though the creaturely should no longer encourage a collapse into the passive indulgence of victimhood, it should leave available readings of history that accommodate honest reckonings with agency, while maintaining the ethical imperative of attention to the other. An adjustment of the structural paradigm of the human to accommodate the creature may cement such a societal change, accommodating the multiple identities and atomised experiences that the Holocaust and World War Two continue to reverberate.

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<sup>737</sup> Konrad Paul Liesmann, *Der gute Mensch von Österreich: Essays 1980-1995* (Wien: Sonderzahl, 1995), p.171: 'Because human beings cannot be prevented from murderous violence against the species despite enlightenment or education, all efforts must be concentrated into a transformation of the structural paradigm of our life, in such a way that neither Auschwitz nor Hiroshima, neither the gulag nor ecological disaster would even have a chance of getting off the ground. However, one then fears, that we are neither able nor willing to do this.'

**Appendix: Images from the Austrian Pavilion at Auschwitz I.** Oswiecim, Poland. Correct on 19 September 2013. Photographs my own.

The Austrian pavilion, opened in 1978 and located in block 17 of the Auschwitz-Birkenau remembrance pavilion, was closed permanently in October 2013 and is due to be reopened to the public in 2017.<sup>738</sup> The aim of the project, according to, is to present ‘a dignified symbol for a country learning from its dark past and willing to face up to its responsibility.’<sup>739</sup> The images below show the prevalence of the victim myth and the denial of responsibility which governed the interpretation of Austrian history until very recently, showing the timeliness of this research.

Fig. a. Official poster declaring Austria’s stance towards the current Auschwitz pavilion exhibition.

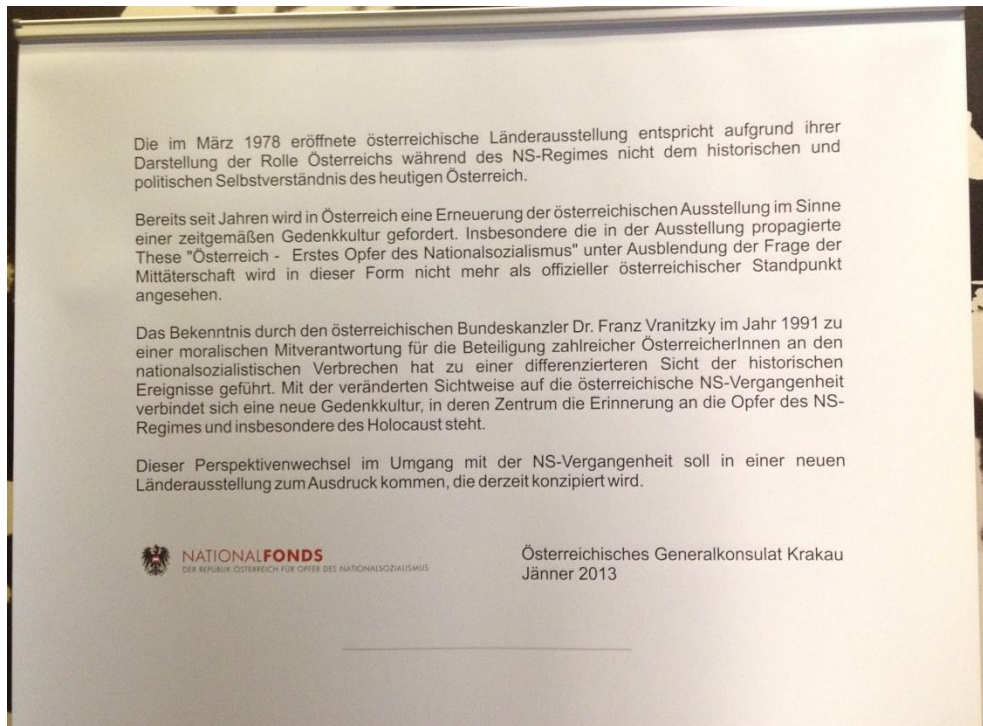


Fig. b. Wall display at the entrance of the Austrian Pavilion at Auschwitz I.

<sup>738</sup> [http://www.holocaustremembrance.com/sites/default/files/austria\\_presentation\\_sammelmappe.pdf](http://www.holocaustremembrance.com/sites/default/files/austria_presentation_sammelmappe.pdf) (Last Accessed: 20 December 2016)

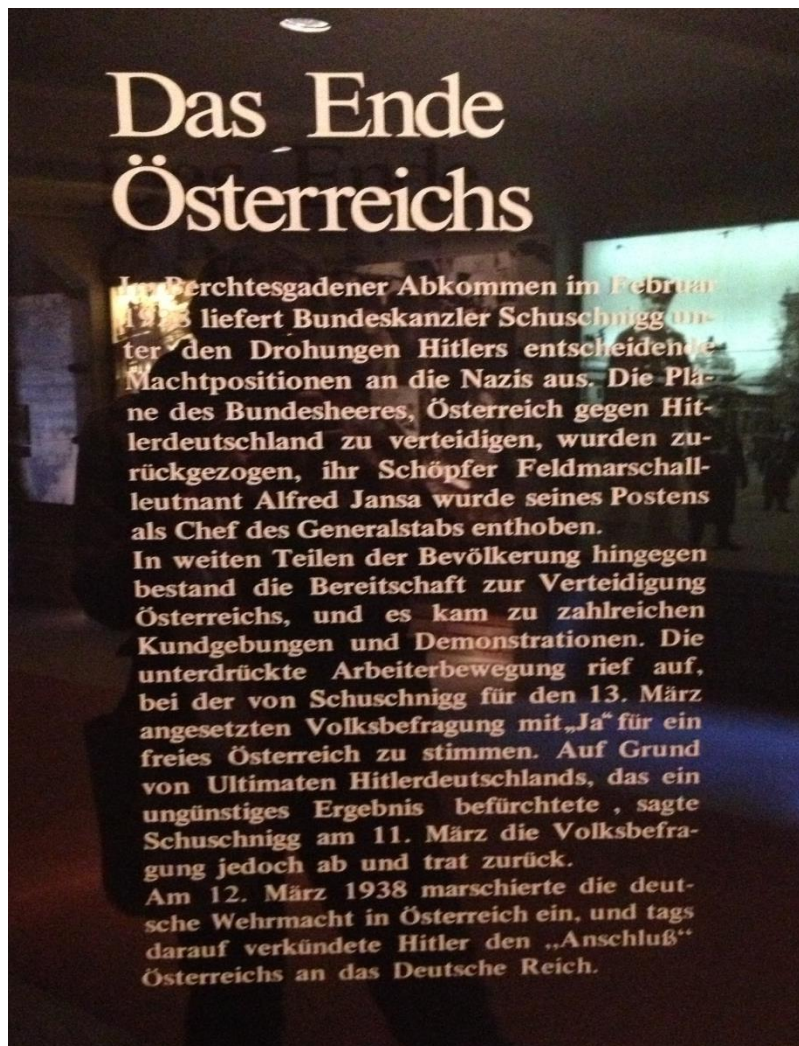
<sup>739</sup> *Ibid.* p.10.



Fig. c. Exhibition poster on the Austrian attitude to the Anschluss in 1938.



Fig. d. Exhibition Text.



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